Paladin

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Stumbling Boar

The Stumbling Boar was thick with smoke, the scent of ale and roasted meat hanging in the air. Rogrim, a stout and imposing dwarf with a thick, braided beard, slammed down an empty tankard, his righteous spirit burning as fiercely as the hearth behind him. Across the table, Pigrim, his halfling servant and self-proclaimed shieldbearer, sipped his ale with far more restraint, watching his master with a weary but knowing expression.

Rogrim ranted about the wickedness of the world, his voice carrying over the din of the tavern. He spoke of duty, of the weak crying out for a protector, of villainy running unchecked. His fist came down hard on the table, making the tankards rattle. Pigrim sighed, knowing there was no talking the dwarf out of his grand notions.

“If the road calls, best we not walk it in rags,” the halfling muttered, already resigned to the path ahead.

With a decisive nod, Rogrim rose to his feet. The journey could not begin without proper gear, and so they set off to the smiths.

The heat of the forge engulfed them as they stepped into Borin’s shop, where the burly armor smith wiped soot from his brow at the sight of them. He chuckled, eyeing the dwarf’s nearly empty coin pouch, but Rogrim would not be swayed. He spoke of the necessity of armor, of a warrior’s duty, until Borin, shaking his head, pulled out a set of sturdy leather. It was not the plate Rogrim envisioned for himself, but it would turn a blade or two. A set of gauntlets, boots, a sturdy belt, and an iron helm completed the ensemble. Pigrim, ever the pragmatist, chose light leather, something that would allow him to move quickly should things take a turn for the worse.

Their next stop was the weapons smith, where the scent of oil and steel lingered in the air. Greth, the wiry smith, grinned as they entered, quick with a jest about whether they had come to admire his craft or actually spend coin. Rogrim, ever righteous, declared that a warrior must be armed, and so Greth offered him a solid mace, a weapon built for crushing foes, along with a shield to guard against the darkness he so often spoke of. Pigrim, testing the weight of a short sword, remarked that it might even let him live through what they were about to embark upon.

With their coin nearly spent, they made their final stop at the market. The scent of roasted meats and fresh bread filled the air as they stocked up on dried provisions and, naturally, a few flasks of ale for the road. Pigrim suggested a donkey, reasoning that carrying all their gear might prove troublesome. Rogrim scoffed at the idea, declaring that a true warrior bore his own burdens—and he would not be sharing his ale with a beast.

With their packs full and weapons strapped, they stepped onto the open road, leaving the comforts of the tavern behind.

For days, Rogrim and Pigrim traveled along the dusty road, their boots kicking up small clouds of earth with each determined step. The sun hung high in the sky, baking the dirt path

beneath them, while dry grasses swayed on either side, whispering secrets in the wind. Sparse trees dotted the landscape, their twisted forms gnarled by years of relentless weather, and in the distance, rolling hills painted the horizon in soft shades of gold and green. The occasional chirp of a distant bird broke the silence, accompanied by the rustling of unseen creatures darting through the underbrush.

The road stretched onward with little sign of civilization. Rogrim marched ahead with the determined gait of a man who saw purpose in every step, while Pigrim followed at a more leisurely pace, occasionally taking sips from a flask tucked beneath his belt.

As they neared a fork in the road, they spotted a small group of travelers approaching from the opposite direction. The strangers offered nods of greeting, and Rogrim, ever the noble figure, returned the gesture with a firm salute. Pigrim simply waved. The travelers passed, their voices fading into the wind, and the two continued their journey down the left path.

Not long after, a commotion caught their attention. Up ahead, two men were engaged in a brutal struggle. One, a wiry figure with a torn shirt, lay on his back in the dirt, shielding his face as the other—a broad-shouldered brute with a jagged scar running down his cheek—rained fists down upon him.

Rogrim did not hesitate. Justice demanded action.

With a thunderous step, he charged forward and slammed into the standing man, sending him sprawling into the dust. He planted his boot firmly on the man's chest and bellowed, "What madness is this? Speak, before I decide to leave my boot here permanently!"

The man still on the ground scrambled up, clutching his ribs. "He—he was robbing me! Tried to take my coin pouch, the bastard!" He gestured toward a small leather pouch lying nearby, its drawstrings loosened.

Rogrim snorted and nodded. Without another word, he clenched his fist and delivered a swift punch to the attacker's temple, sending him into unconsciousness.

The supposed victim wasted no time. Snatching up the pouch, he muttered a quick, "Much obliged," before turning on his heel and disappearing down the road.

Pigrim scratched his head. "Bit of a rush, wasn't he?"

Before Rogrim could respond, the fallen man groaned, stirring awake. He sat up, rubbing his head, then suddenly lurched forward, eyes wide with fury. "You fool! That man was robbing me! Now he's run off with my coin pouch!"

Rogrim felt a deep frown settle onto his face. "And you've proof of this?"

The man's fingers fumbled at his belt, as if reaching for something that was no longer there. "Aye! Inside the pouch, there's a locket! Carved on it is the face of my darling Elina. I swear it on my life!"

A slow, burning anger coiled in Rogrim's gut. He had been deceived. Used. His goodwill twisted against him. He clenched his fists and, without another word, took off running in pursuit of the thief.

His boots pounded against the road, kicking up dust as he surged forward. The sun was beginning to dip toward the horizon, casting long shadows that stretched like claws across the ground. The thief was fast, but Rogrim was fueled by justice, and that fire burned hotter than fear.

Before long, the man came into view, his pace slowing as he likely thought himself safe. Rogrim's voice boomed through the air. "Halt, thief! Drop the pouch or face the consequences!"

The man whirled, breath heaving. His hand darted to his belt, drawing forth a sword. "You want it? Come and take it, dwarf."

Rogrim did not hesitate. The fight erupted like a storm.

Steel clashed against steel as the thief lunged, his blade slicing through the air. Rogrim twisted aside, but not fast enough—pain seared across his arm as the tip of the sword bit into flesh. With a snarl, he swung his mace, catching the thief's shoulder with a sickening crunch. The man stumbled, but did not fall.

Pigrim, panting and finally catching up, watched from a distance, keeping his own blade ready should he need to intervene.

The thief recovered quickly and came again, this time feinting left before driving his sword forward. Rogrim barely managed to deflect the strike with his shield, the impact jarring his arm. He countered with a brutal backhand from his mace, smashing it against the thief's ribs. A sharp crack filled the air, followed by a pained gasp.

Blood dripped from both men now, staining the dry earth beneath them. The thief's breathing was ragged, his stance faltering. He lunged one last time, desperate, but Rogrim sidestepped and slammed his shield into the man's face, sending him crashing to the ground.

For a moment, the only sound was the distant chirping of crickets. Then, with a heavy breath, Rogrim knelt and pried the coin pouch from the unconscious thief's grasp. He opened it. Nestled among the coins was a small, worn locket. He flicked it open and found the carving of a woman's face.

Justice had been served.

By the time Rogrim returned to the man who had been wronged, the wounds on his arm and side had already begun to dry. The man took the pouch with wide, grateful eyes and pressed fifty silver coins into Rogrim's palm.

"A reward for a righteous man," the traveler said.

Rogrim nodded but said nothing. He had done what was right, but the bitter taste of being deceived once still lingered on his tongue.

With a sigh, he turned to Pigrim. “Come. The road still stretches far before us.”

And with that, the two continued their journey, the sun sinking low behind them.

The sun hung high in the sky, casting long shadows as Rogrim and Pigrim trudged down the dusty road. The air was thick with the scent of wildflowers and dry earth, the occasional buzz of an insect breaking the stillness. Rogrim suddenly stopped, planting his feet firmly in the dirt.

“Hold, Pigrim! It is time to pray,” he declared, raising a hand skyward.

Pigrim, who had just been adjusting the straps of his pack, sighed. “Again? We stopped two hours ago.”

“Aye, and we shall stop again in two more. A great paladin must pray multiple times a day, lest the holy power within wane.” Rogrim puffed out his chest and knelt down, placing his hands over his mace. Closing his eyes, he began his prayer.

“Oh mighty Moradin, Forgefather, Lord of Stone and Shield! Grant me strength to smite the wicked, wisdom to guide the lost, and endurance to carry this weighty mantle of righteousness. May my mace strike true, may my shield never falter, and may my ale never run dry. In your name, I vow to uphold justice, protect the weak, and ensure that villainy shall find no quarter where I tread! So it is spoken, so it shall be done!”

Pigrim tapped his foot, waiting for the ritual to end. When Rogrim finally stood, dusting off his knees, the halfling crossed his arms. “You know, you’ve not actually had any paladin training yet.”

Rogrim scoffed, his beard bristling. “By the Holy Lord of Light, One will in soon enough time!”

“Uh-huh. And where exactly is this training supposed to happen? You don’t even know any prayers from the paladin order.”

Rogrim waved a dismissive hand. “Bah! Who needs an order when one already embodies all that is righteous? Now, enough talk. I require sustenance.” He turned to Pigrim expectantly. “Ale. Now.”

Pigrim rolled his eyes but pulled out a flask and handed it over. Rogrim uncorked it and took a long, satisfied gulp, smacking his lips. “Ahh, holy nectar of the gods.”

They continued their march, Rogrim leading the way as though on some divine mission. The road stretched on for miles before they came upon a small stream, its clear waters babbling over smooth stones. Without hesitation, Rogrim sat down on the grassy bank and yanked off his boots, wiggling his toes with a sigh.

“Pigrim, attend to my feet.”

The halfling blinked. “...Come again?”

Rogrim gestured grandly to the water. “Refresh them with the cool embrace of the stream. A warrior must not suffer sore feet, lest he falter in battle.”

Pigrim stared at him, then at the calloused, dirt-streaked feet now resting before him. He sighed dramatically, trudged to the water, and began splashing cool water over Rogrim’s feet with a look of supreme resignation.

“A mighty honor,” Pigrim muttered. “Truly, I live a blessed life.”

Rogrim grinned. “Aye, and do not forget it.”

Satisfied, he reached into his pack, pulling out some dried meat and a crust of bread. “The mighty warrior must have some food on the road,” he mused, tearing off a piece of bread with his teeth. “Pity it is not a lamb with potatoes and some wine!”

Pigrim flicked some water at him. “You just had ale.”

“Aye, but ale and wine are different, my dear shieldbearer. Wine is for savoring, ale is for drinking. A warrior must appreciate the finer things, though he may seldom afford them.”

Rogrim leaned back against a tree and stretched, looking down at Pigrim with a wise, self-satisfied expression. “You see, Pigrim, the life of a paladin is not one for the faint of heart. We walk a path of virtue, righteousness, and self-sacrifice.” He took another bite of bread, crumbs tumbling into his beard. “We are the sword against the darkness, the shield of the innocent. To be a paladin is to be the beacon of hope in a world fraught with peril.”

Pigrim raised an eyebrow. “Uh-huh. And how exactly does making me wash your feet fit into that noble vision?”

Rogrim waved a hand. “A paladin must be cared for, so that he may better serve. Would you let a holy warrior go into battle with blisters?”

Pigrim sighed. “I should have been a bard.”

Rogrim patted his shoulder, leaving a large, meaty handprint on the halfling’s vest. “Nonsense, lad. You were born for this.”

Pigrim muttered something under his breath but didn’t argue further. Rogrim, pleased with his own wisdom, finished his meal, stretched once more, and pulled his boots back on. “Come now! There is much road ahead, and we must be ever-vigilant. Justice waits for no dwarf.”

With that, they pressed on, the stream babbling behind them, the road ahead long and uncertain.

The sun had begun its slow descent, casting long shadows across the dirt road as Rogrim and Pigrim pressed forward. The sound of rustling leaves broke the peaceful rhythm of their march, and Rogrim's keen eyes caught a figure stepping onto the road ahead. A lone wolf, its fur bristling, its yellow eyes locked onto them.

Another appeared to its side. Then another. Soon, four wolves stood in their path, their lips curling back to reveal sharp fangs, low growls rumbling from deep within their throats.

Rogrim planted his feet and raised his mace. “Off with you, damn beasts of the forest! By the Light of the Holy, I demand you clear the road!”

The wolves did not move. Their wide, hungry eyes fixed on the dwarf. One let out a sharp bark before springing forward, its jaws clamping down on Rogrim’s forearm. The force sent a searing pain through his arm as the wolf’s teeth tore through leather and into flesh.

“Damn you, beast of darkness! Off with you NOW!” he roared, but the creature only dug in deeper.

Rogrim swung wildly with his mace, but the angle was poor. The wolf thrashed its head, tearing flesh from bone, and soon the others joined the fray. One lunged at Pigrim, knocking him off his feet before he could even raise his sword. Another clamped its teeth around Rogrim’s boot, yanking him off balance. He tumbled forward, his face slamming into the dirt, his beard instantly caked with dust and grit.

Before he could rise, sharp fangs found his beard. A violent yank tore some strands loose from his chin, sending a fresh wave of pain coursing through him. He let out an enraged yell, twisting and rolling to free himself, but another beast pounced on his back, pinning him.

Pigrim, screaming, was being dragged down the road by the scruff of his cloak, his small legs flailing in the air. His sword was still clutched in his hands, but he couldn’t get a good swing. “Rogrim! This is bad! This is REALLY bad!”

The dwarf roared in frustration, summoning every ounce of strength. He pushed up with his good arm, forcing himself onto his knees, and bellowed a prayer that rang through the forest.

"By the Hammer of Moradin, by the Light of the Righteous, let the wicked be struck down! Let the dark cower before the flame! The faithful shall not fall this day!"

As if the words carried divine force, Rogrim slammed his shield into the side of the wolf on his back, sending it tumbling off with a yelp. His mace, now free, found its mark at last—he drove it straight into the ribs of the wolf at his boot, crushing bone beneath its iron head. The beast whimpered and fell limp.

Pigrim, still being dragged along, managed to twist his body and drive his sword into the leg of the wolf hauling him. The creature howled in pain and released him, scampering back. The others, seeing their packmate slain and their prey now fighting back with ferocity, hesitated.

Rogrim rose to his feet, his face a storm of righteous fury. “BEGONE, CREATURES OF DARKNESS! BACK TO YOUR DAMNED WOODS!”

His roar echoed through the trees. The surviving wolves took no chances. They turned and fled, vanishing into the undergrowth as quickly as they had come. Only the body of the slain one remained, its breath forever stilled.

Pigrim lay on the road, panting. His cloak was torn, his arms scraped, his face twisted into a grimace of pain. “That was… unpleasant.”

Rogrim wiped the blood from his arm, looking down at the halfling with a knowing smile. “A lesson, Pigrim.”

Pigrim groaned, rolling onto his back. “Oh no.”

“The roads are not safe. Evil lurks in every shadow, preying upon the weak. This is why we fight.” He gestured toward the dead wolf with his mace. “This is why we stand against the darkness.”

Pigrim sat up, rubbing his sore limbs. “Yeah? And where were the weak and innocent in all this? Looked to me like the only ones getting mauled were us.”

Rogrim huffed. “That is not the point! The world is filled with vile creatures, just waiting for the moment to strike. Had we been merchants, or a mother and child, those beasts would have made a feast of us. It is our duty to ensure the wicked never get that chance.”

Pigrim wiped some dirt from his sleeve, shaking his head. “Next time, maybe we try to avoid getting our beards chewed off in the process.”

Rogrim ran a hand through his now slightly thinner beard, grimacing. “Aye… a paladin must endure many trials.”

Pigrim chuckled. “Well, at least you look less like a walking bush now.”

Rogrim shot him a glare before taking a deep breath, composing himself. He reached into his pouch and pulled out his flask, taking a long, steady swig. “A lesson well-learned deserves a drink.”

Pigrim shook his head, still catching his breath, but eventually took the flask when it was offered. “To survival, then.”

Rogrim nodded solemnly. “To justice.”

They sat there for a moment longer, letting the adrenaline settle, before finally gathering themselves and pressing onward. The road stretched ahead, and the dangers lurking beyond it would not wait for them to recover.

As the sun dipped lower in the sky, casting a warm golden glow over the landscape, Rogrim and Pigrim trudged on, their bodies aching from the day’s journey and the wounds left by the wolves. The road stretched endlessly ahead, but with every step, the idea of rest became more appealing.

By the time twilight settled in, they had found a small clearing near a gently flowing river. The sound of water rushing over smooth stones filled the air, a soothing contrast to the long silence of the road.

“This’ll do,” Rogrim declared, planting his mace into the ground and stretching his weary limbs. “A good paladin must know how to rest properly after a day’s march. Else he’ll be too sore to smite evil on the morrow.”

Pigrim groaned, rolling his shoulders. “Aye, well, I don’t recall any halfling ballads about paladins complaining about their aching feet.”

“Because true paladins do not complain,” Rogrim shot back. “They simply state facts.”

With no argument left to make, Pigrim set to work gathering firewood while Rogrim cleared a patch of earth for their campfire. Soon, the crackling flames danced in the cool night air, their warmth chasing away the evening chill.

Near the river, they built a simple wooden grid from fallen branches, positioning it in the shallows in hopes of trapping a fish. With the work done, Rogrim settled onto a large rock, pulling out his pipe. He packed it with fragrant leaf, striking a small ember to light it. He took a deep drag, exhaling a cloud of smoke that curled lazily into the night sky.

Pigrim sniffed the air. “That smells better than whatever’s growing in your boots.”

Rogrim smiled. “A good pipe is the mark of a seasoned warrior. After battle, after hardship, one must find moments of peace.”

Pigrim rolled his eyes but said nothing, instead turning his gaze to the fire as it crackled and spit embers into the darkening sky.

Hours passed, the night stretching long and slow. At last, a splash in the river signaled success. They rushed to their trap, pulling free a fat fish flapping wildly. Pigrim made quick work of cleaning it while Rogrim sharpened a stick for roasting. Soon, the scent of fresh, sizzling fish filled the air, a welcome change from their usual dried rations.

They ate heartily, tearing into the meal with the vigor of men who had been walking far too long. Rogrim let out a contented sigh as he leaned back, patting his stomach.

“Now that, Pigrim, was a proper meal,” he said. “A pity it was not a great boar with spiced wine, but a warrior does not always feast. He takes what is given and gives thanks for it.”

Pigrim, licking his fingers, nodded. “Aye, and I’m thankful I didn’t have to eat another crust of stale bread tonight.”

As the fire burned low, Rogrim pulled out some moss he had gathered earlier, pressing it against the wound on his arm. Pigrim tied it up with a strip of cloth, shaking his head. “Next time, maybe try not letting wolves use your arm as a chew toy.”

Rogrim grunted. “A paladin does not always choose his battles, but he must finish them.”

With that, he turned his eyes to the night sky, watching the stars twinkle above. After a moment of silence, he cleared his throat and began another lesson.

“The life of a paladin is not just about battle, lad. It is about choosing the righteous path when all others falter. It is about strength, yes, but also wisdom. A blade may strike down a foe, but words can save a soul.” He turned to Pigrim with a knowing look. “And a true paladin must always protect the weak, even when the weak are foolish.”

Pigrim smiled. “So, like you protecting me from that fish? It looked real dangerous.”

Rogrim sighed. “You jest now, but mark my words, there will come a day when the weight of righteousness will rest upon your shoulders, and then you will understand.”

Pigrim yawned, stretching his arms. “Aye, well, I hope that weight comes with a pillow, because I’m about to collapse.”

Chuckling, Rogrim nodded and pulled his cloak around him. The fire crackled gently as they both drifted into sleep, the soft sounds of the river lulling them into rest.

Morning came too soon. Rogrim woke first, stretching with a grunt. Then, something felt… off. An itch, a sting. He rubbed his arm and frowned. Then he felt another sting. And another.

“By Moradin’s beard!” he bellowed, sitting up. His face was covered in red welts, his arms and neck swollen with fresh bites.

Pigrim sat up with a groan, scratching his own arms wildly. “Oh, bloody hells—what in the nine planes is this?!”

Gadflies and mosquitoes had feasted upon them in the night, their tiny tormentors now buzzing lazily through the morning air.

Rogrim swatted at them, cursing as he scratched furiously. “Vile creatures! Scourge of the land! Even the beasts of the night show more honor than you!”

Pigrim was hopping in place, slapping his neck and arms. “We fought wolves, Rogrim! WOLVES! And this is how we suffer?!”

Rogrim gritted his teeth. “A paladin must endure suffering, lad.” He smacked his forearm, killing a mosquito. “But there is a limit to all things.”

Pigrim, scratching furiously, groaned. “Next time we make camp, I say we sleep in a damn cave.”

Rogrim grumbled, still scratching. “Aye… but first, breakfast.”

With that, the two miserable, bitten warriors packed up camp and set off once more, itching every step of the way.

Gandor

As the towering stone gates of Gandor came into view, Rogrim and Pigrim quickened their pace. The city stood proudly, its walls weathered by time but strong as ever. The scent of fresh bread, roasted meats, and the unmistakable aroma of ale drifted through the air, luring weary travelers toward its many comforts.

Pigrim stretched his arms. “Finally! A place with real beds, real food, and most importantly —”

“A proper drink,” Rogrim finished for him, his eyes already scanning the bustling streets for a tavern worthy of their patronage.

They didn’t have to look far. The Misty Mug stood near the marketplace, its wooden sign swaying gently in the breeze. The scent of hops and roasted barley spilled from its doors, promising a warm meal and a cold pint. Without hesitation, they stepped inside.

The tavern was lively but not rowdy—merchants unwinding after a long day, city guards sharing stories over tankards, and a bard strumming a quiet tune in the corner. Behind the bar, a broad-shouldered, balding man with a thick mustache wiped a mug clean. His eyes, sharp despite his age, flicked toward the newcomers.

“Welcome to the Misty Mug, travelers! What’ll it be?”

Rogrim marched up to the bar. “Ale. And plenty of it.”

Pigrim climbed onto a stool, resting his elbows on the counter. “And a meal, if you’ve got one.”

The innkeeper chuckled. “You’ve come to the right place.” He filled two tankards from a wooden keg and slid them across the counter. “Name’s Orlin. Always happy to see new faces.”

Rogrim took a deep swig, sighing with satisfaction. “By the gods, that’s fine work, Orlin.”

The innkeeper grinned. “Aye, but not as fine as what you’d get from The Golden Tankard.”

Rogrim raised an eyebrow. “The Golden Tankard? That a brewery?”

Orlin’s expression soured. “Was. Gandor’s pride, run by dwarves who knew their craft better than anyone. But the place has been shut down for days.”

Rogrim frowned. “Shut down? What madness is this?”

The innkeeper leaned forward, lowering his voice. “Hauntings. Kegs rolling on their own, ghostly whispers, things moving about in the night. One of the workers even vanished into the cellar. Folks are too scared to go near it.”

Pigrim let out a low whistle. “Sounds like someone’s got a particularly angry hangover.”

Orlin gave him a look. “If only. The owner’s desperate to get the place running again. If someone were to… investigate, and clear out whatever’s lurking down there, well, they’d be mighty well compensated.”

Rogrim cracked his knuckles. “Ghosts, you say? Ha! The darkness fears the righteous. I shall purge this wickedness and restore the honor of The Golden Tankard!”

Pigrim sighed. “Every time with this.”

The innkeeper chuckled. “If you’re serious, go speak with Old Brumli. He owns the place. Lives just down the road from the brewery. He’ll tell you everything.”

Rogrim drained the rest of his ale in a single gulp, slamming the tankard onto the counter. “A paladin’s work is never done!”

Pigrim took one last bite of his meal before sliding off his stool. “A halfling’s work, on the other hand, is usually a lot safer.”

With their mission set before them, the two left the Misty Mug, stepping into the lantern-lit streets of Gandor. The night air was cool, but adventure burned hot in Rogrim’s veins. The Brewery of the Damned awaited.

The streets of Gandor bustled even as night settled in. Lanterns flickered along the stone pathways, casting warm pools of light as merchants packed up their stalls and weary travelers sought out shelter. The scent of fresh-baked bread mixed with the tang of burning wood, and somewhere in the distance, a minstrel’s lute plucked out a slow, melancholic tune.

Rogrim strode with purpose, his boots clanking against the cobblestone road. Pigrim followed, hands tucked into his belt, eyeing the passing crowd warily.

“You know,” the halfling muttered, “we could have just enjoyed a few more ales, maybe found some nice, warm beds, and ignored all this ghost business.”

Rogrim scoffed. “Nonsense! A brewery is a temple of merriment, and no righteous soul should stand idly by while such a holy place is defiled by spirits of ill intent.” He stroked his beard. “Besides, what sort of dwarf would I be if I let a fine establishment of ale fall into ruin?”

Pigrim sighed. “Oh, yes, of course. Honor, righteousness, the good of the people. And not at all about free drinks when this is over.”

Rogrim ignored him and pressed on.

They soon arrived at a stout wooden door, the dwelling of Brumli, the owner of The Golden Tankard. A faded crest of a foaming mug was carved into the doorframe. Rogrim rapped his knuckles against the wood.

A few moments passed before the door creaked open, revealing an elderly dwarf with a wiry gray beard and tired eyes. He squinted up at them, holding a lantern high.

“If you’re selling anything, I don’t want it,” Brumli grumbled.

Rogrim grinned. “What if I’m selling salvation?”

Brumli blinked. “What?”

Pigrim elbowed Rogrim in the side. “What my overdramatic friend means is—we heard about your haunted brewery. We’re here to help.”

Brumli’s expression softened with relief, and he stepped aside. “Then you’d best come in.”

The interior of Brumli’s home was modest but well-kept. Shelves lined with old brewing tools and dusty bottles filled the walls. A small fireplace crackled in the corner, casting flickering shadows across the wooden floors.

Brumli poured them each a mug of ale, rubbing his tired eyes as he sat down. “You’ve no idea how glad I am to hear that someone’s willing to help. I’ve lost good workers already—one vanished right into the damned cellar. We hear whispers, see kegs rolling by themselves. A few nights ago, I even saw a shadow moving through the brewing hall. No one dares enter now.”

Rogrim took a deep gulp of his ale. “Sounds like a proper haunting.”

Pigrim swirled his drink absentmindedly. “Or a rival playing tricks to shut you down.”

Brumli nodded. “Could be. We have competitors, of course, but none who’d go this far. I’d rather it be sabotage than something unnatural.”

Rogrim set his mug down firmly. “Fear not! If this is a spirit, I shall send it back to whatever forsaken realm it came from. If it’s a living scoundrel, my mace shall introduce them to the errors of their ways.”

Brumli chuckled. “You clean this mess up, and you drink free in my halls for a month.”

Rogrim grinned. “Consider it done.”

Pigrim sighed. “I’m starting to think we need to start charging more for these heroics.”

Brumli stood and gestured toward the door. “Then come. I’ll take you to The Golden Tankard.”

With tankards emptied and spirits high, the two followed Brumli into the night, ready to face whatever lurked in the depths of the brewery.

Brumli led Rogrim and Pigrim through the dimly lit streets of Gandor, his lantern casting long shadows against the old stone walls. The deeper they went into the city, the quieter it became. The usual bustle of taverns and market squares faded behind them, replaced by the hushed murmur of the wind and the occasional distant hoot of an owl.

At last, they arrived at their destination.

The Golden Tankard loomed before them, a grand dwarven brewery built from sturdy stone and reinforced wood, its carved pillars adorned with images of foaming mugs and barley stalks. Yet, despite its proud craftsmanship, there was an eerie stillness to the place. The front doors stood shut, the sign above them swaying slightly in the breeze. The once-beloved brewery now bore the weight of abandonment.

Brumli sighed and unlocked the heavy doors. They creaked open, revealing a large hall filled with rows of massive wooden kegs stacked upon one another. The air was thick with the lingering scent of old hops and spilled ale. Dust swirled in the lantern's glow, and a strange chill clung to the room, unnatural for a place that once bustled with warmth and laughter.

"There it is," Brumli muttered, stepping aside. "You see now why no one dares work here?"

Rogrim sniffed the air. "Aye. I smell something foul."

Pigrim frowned. "Smells like a regular old brewery to me."

"No, lad." Rogrim narrowed his eyes, gripping his mace. "Not the ale—the air. It's thick with somethin'... wrong."

A soft creaking echoed through the chamber. Pigrim turned his head just in time to see a keg shift slightly, as if nudged by an unseen force. Another creak followed. Then, a low whisper slithered through the silence.

Pigrim's hand went straight to his sword. "Right. That's not normal."

Brumli took a step back. "It's worse in the cellar. That's where Orik disappeared."

Rogrim squared his shoulders. "Then that's where we'll start."

The dwarf took a few confident strides toward the cellar door, yanked it open, and peered down the narrow stone staircase that vanished into darkness. The air that seeped up from below was damp, stale, and carried a faint hint of something metallic.

Pigrim shivered. "You know, this is usually the part of the story where the foolhardy adventurers go down into the dark and never come back."

Rogrim clapped him on the shoulder. "Then it's a good thing we ain't fools, eh?"

Pigrim groaned. "Debatable."

Brumli handed Rogrim a lantern. "If you're truly going down there, be careful. Whatever's causing this—ghost, saboteur, or worse—it doesn't want to be found."

Rogrim smiled. “Aye, well, I’ve never been one to give evil what it wants.”

With that, they descended into the unknown, the light of the lantern flickering as it struggled against the darkness below.

The stone steps leading into the cellar were slick with dampness, the air growing colder with each step Rogrim and Pigrim took. Their lantern cast flickering light on the walls, revealing barrels stacked high and old crates covered in cobwebs. The scent of stale ale and something far less pleasant—something metallic, almost like blood—lingered in the air.

Pigrim gripped his sword tightly. “I hate this. I hate everything about this.”

Rogrim scoffed. “A warrior does not fear the dark, Pigrim. He *embraces* it, knowing that his light will banish all wickedness.”

As if to challenge him, a low whisper slithered through the air. It wasn’t words, but a soft, unnatural sound, like wind howling through unseen cracks. Pigrim tensed.

“There! You heard that, didn’t you?”

Rogrim nodded, raising the lantern higher. “Aye. A restless spirit, perhaps.”

He strode forward confidently, his boots echoing on the cold stone floor. Pigrim hesitated, glancing back toward the stairs, but followed nonetheless.

Then, a sudden noise—a hollow *thump*—echoed from the far side of the cellar. They both froze. Another *thump*, then a *scraping* sound.

Rogrim tightened his grip on his mace. “Show yourself, spirit! Face the judgment of the righteous!”

The response came swiftly. One of the barrels shifted violently, tipping over and rolling straight toward them. Pigrim yelped and leaped aside, while Rogrim barely managed to sidestep in time. The barrel crashed against the stairs behind them, splintering apart.

Pigrim, heart pounding, pointed his sword toward the darkness. “Right, that wasn’t the wind.”

Rogrim advanced toward the source of the disturbance. “Stay close, lad.”

As they moved deeper into the cellar, the whispers grew louder. Shadows danced unnaturally in the lantern’s glow, shifting in ways that made no sense. Then, from the far end of the room, something materialized—a translucent figure, its form flickering like mist caught in a breeze.

It was the outline of a dwarf, its hollow eyes glowing faintly in the darkness. The figure lifted an arm, pointing directly at them.

Rogrim took a firm step forward. “Speak, restless one! Why do you haunt this place?”

The spirit’s voice echoed, hollow and strained. “*The barrels… the tunnels… they took me…*”

Pigrim swallowed hard. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

Rogrim furrowed his brow. “Who took you?”

The spirit shuddered, its form flickering. “*The dark… it crawls…*”

Then, the floor beneath them shifted. A deep, rumbling sound echoed from the back of the cellar, where the barrels were stacked. A section of the floor suddenly *collapsed*, revealing a narrow tunnel descending into blackness. Cold air rushed upward, and the whispers grew into an eerie, distorted wail.

Pigrim took a shaky step backward. “Oh no. Oh *no*. Absolutely not.”

Rogrim, however, looked down into the pit with steely determination. “A hidden passage. And I’d wager it’s the source of all this madness.” He turned to Pigrim, smiling. “You’re small. You go first.”

Pigrim gaped at him. “Are you mad?! I’m *not* crawling into some dark, cursed hole while spirits whisper nightmares in my ears!”

Rogrim chuckled. “A test of courage, lad. A paladin must—”

“No. No paladin nonsense. You first.”

Rogrim grumbled but conceded. He handed the lantern to Pigrim and, with a deep breath, dropped down into the tunnel, landing on solid ground below. The air was thick with dust, and the walls were made of roughly carved stone, damp with age.

Pigrim hesitated before sighing. “This is how I die.” Then he climbed down after him.

The tunnel stretched forward into darkness, the whispers now almost a *chant* in the air.

Whatever lay ahead… it was waiting for them.

The tunnel walls were damp and rough, carved out by tools or claws—Rogrim couldn’t yet tell. The air was thick with the scent of mold, stale ale, and something worse. The whispers still slithered through the darkness, shifting between ghostly murmurs and distorted wails, sending shivers down Pigrim’s spine.

“By all the good gods,” Pigrim muttered, holding the lantern high. “I don’t suppose you’d consider turning back and just *telling* Brumli we solved the problem?”

Rogrim scoffed. “A paladin does not flee from darkness. He marches into it and *cleaves* it apart.”

Pigrim sighed. “Aye, aye. You also said a paladin must eat well, and yet here we are, crawling through a haunted beer hole instead of enjoying roast lamb.”

Rogrim grunted but said nothing. He pressed on, his heavy boots squelching slightly on the damp earth. The tunnel sloped downward, and soon they reached an old wooden support

beam, warped and cracked from years of neglect. Beyond it, the passage opened into a larger chamber.

The lantern's glow revealed massive, overturned barrels, some still leaking their soured contents onto the ground. Thick cobwebs stretched across the walls, and among the debris lay rusted tools, shattered mugs, and torn scraps of cloth.

And then… the bones.

Pigrim cursed under his breath. A skeletal form lay slumped against the far wall, half-buried in the dirt. Its skull was cracked, its bony fingers still clutching an empty tankard as if its last moments had been spent in futile defiance.

Rogrim knelt, running his fingers over the bones. "Dwarf remains," he muttered. "This poor soul never made it out."

Before Pigrim could respond, a new sound echoed through the chamber—a wet, *skittering* noise.

They both froze.

From the shadows beyond the fallen skeleton, something *moved*.

Pigrim's grip on his sword tightened. "Tell me that's just a large rat. A *very* large rat."

Rogrim said nothing. He stood slowly, raising his mace.

The skittering grew louder. Then, two *glowing* eyes emerged from the darkness. They were small at first, reflecting the lantern's light… and then another pair appeared. And another.

Eight eyes in total.

The creature stepped into the light.

A monstrous *spider*, bloated and covered in patches of matted fur, crawled forward from its nest. Thick strands of webbing clung to its legs, its fangs dripping with a dark, viscous substance. It let out a *horrid* clicking noise before lunging forward.

Rogrim barely had time to raise his shield before the beast struck. The force sent him stumbling back, his boots sliding on the wet floor.

Pigrim yelped and darted aside as the spider swung one of its grotesque limbs toward him, splintering a nearby barrel.

"Damn it, Rogrim, why is it *always* monsters?!"

Rogrim, bracing himself, bellowed, "By Moradin's forge, you *shall not* best me, foul creature!"

He swung his mace, striking the spider's leg with a sickening *crack*. The beast let out a shrill screech and recoiled, but it was far from finished.

It lunged again, this time catching Rogrim's shield with its fangs. Venom hissed as it dribbled onto the wood, sizzling where it made contact. Rogrim gritted his teeth and shoved with all his strength, forcing the creature back.

Pigrim, meanwhile, ducked behind a toppled barrel, frantically searching for an opening. "You're doing great, Rogrim! Really holding your ground!"

The dwarf shot him a glare. "Would be better if *someone* helped!"

Pigrim peeked out just as the spider lunged again. With a surge of reckless bravery (and mild panic), the halfling rolled forward and drove his sword deep into the creature's underbelly.

The spider shrieked. Its legs convulsed violently as it reared back, black ichor spilling from the wound.

Rogrim took the opening. With a mighty roar, he raised his mace high and *brought it down* on the spider's head. The impact sent a gruesome *splatter* of ichor across the floor, and the creature let out one last shudder before collapsing into a twitching heap.

Silence filled the chamber.

Pigrim panted, wiping sweat (and possibly spider blood) from his brow. "Well… that was *horrifying*."

Rogrim, breathing heavily, planted his boot on the creature's carcass and crossed his arms. "Victory, lad. Hard-won, but righteous."

Pigrim groaned. "Next time, I pick the work."

Rogrim chuckled, but his amusement faded as he turned his gaze back to the skeleton. There was something wedged between its ribs—a small, dust-covered satchel. He reached down and carefully pulled it free.

Inside, among a few rusted coins, was a sealed parchment.

Pigrim frowned. "What's that?"

Rogrim broke the seal and unfolded the note. His brow furrowed as he read aloud:

"The tunnels run deeper than they let on. We dug too far. There is something else down here… something watching. If I do not return, tell Brumli I am sorry."

A cold silence fell over them.

Pigrim sighed deeply. "Oh, for the love of—there's *more*?"

Rogrim rolled the parchment and tucked it away. “Aye. And we’re not leaving until we see this through.”

He turned his gaze toward the deeper tunnel beyond the chamber, where the darkness loomed, waiting.

The *real* trouble was yet to come.

The tunnel stretched deeper into the darkness, the air growing colder with each step Rogrim and Pigrim took. The flickering lantern barely pushed back the gloom, its light casting long, wavering shadows on the rough stone walls. The scrawled note from the dead brewer weighed heavily in Rogrim’s mind.

"We dug too far… something else is down here… something watching."

Pigrim glanced around nervously. “Look, I know you’re all about *righteous crusades* and *banishing evil*, but how about—for once—we just *tell* Brumli what we found and let the city guard deal with it?”

Rogrim snorted. “Bah! The city guard are good for chasing pickpockets and breaking up tavern brawls, not for facing *true* darkness. No, lad. A task like this requires warriors of virtue and strength.”

Pigrim sighed, adjusting his sword belt. “Great. So we’re still the idiots walking toward the thing that killed the last fool who came down here.”

The passage sloped downward, the damp walls giving way to ancient stonework. These tunnels were *old*—far older than the brewery above. Faded carvings, worn smooth by time, lined the passage, depicting dwarves in labor, hauling barrels, digging tunnels. But as they moved deeper, the carvings changed.

The dwarves in the stone murals looked… *wrong*. Their faces were twisted in fear, their hands raised against unseen terrors. In the final carving, a massive, shadowy shape loomed over a group of fleeing dwarves, its form indistinct but *menacing*.

Pigrim swallowed hard. “I don’t like this, Rogrim.”

The dwarf ran his fingers over the stone, frowning. “Neither do I, lad.”

A sudden gust of icy wind howled through the tunnel, snuffing out the lantern’s flame.

The darkness swallowed them.

Pigrim yelped. “Nope! Nope, I’m out! We’re leaving—”

A whisper—low and guttural—echoed through the tunnel. Not the distant murmurs from before, but something close. *Too* close.

Rogrim raised his shield, gripping his mace tightly. “Stay behind me, lad.”

Something *moved* in the shadows. A shifting, crawling sound, as if unseen limbs scraped against the walls.

Then, *glowing eyes* appeared in the dark.

One pair. Then two. Then *dozens*.

The tunnel filled with unnatural *chittering*, an eerie, clicking noise that set Rogrim's teeth on edge. The shadows stirred, forming shapes, their glowing eyes burning with hunger.

Pigrim's breath hitched. "Rogrim…"

The creatures struck.

A *mass* of skittering horrors swarmed forward, their twisted, insect-like forms rushing at them from all sides. Rogrim roared, swinging his mace in a wide arc, crushing the first that lunged. Black ichor splattered the ground as the creature let out an unholy screech.

Pigrim ducked under a flurry of gnashing mandibles and *stabbed wildly*. His sword struck true, sinking into the chitinous hide of another monstrosity. It writhed, screeching, before collapsing.

More came.

Rogrim bashed one aside with his shield, but another leapt onto his back, clawed limbs wrapping around his shoulders. He staggered, barely keeping his footing as the thing's foul breath rasped against his neck.

"*OFF WITH YOU, CREATURE OF NIGHT!*" he bellowed, slamming himself backward into the wall. The beast screeched and crumpled, its grip loosening.

Pigrim was faring no better. A creature twice his size lunged, pinning him to the ground. He screamed as its fanged maw snapped inches from his face.

"Rogrim! Little help!"

The dwarf spun, raising his mace. "*BY MORADIN'S LIGHT, BE CLEANSED!*"

The heavy weapon crashed down, shattering the beast's skull. Pigrim scrambled free, panting. "This is *officially* the worst brewery job ever."

The remaining creatures hesitated, sensing the shift. Their glowing eyes flicked toward one another, and then, as suddenly as they had attacked, they *retreated*. The swarm melted into the darkness, vanishing down the tunnel.

Pigrim wiped blood from his cheek. "Why… why did they run?"

Rogrim exhaled heavily. "They weren't defeated." He pointed toward the tunnel ahead, where the darkness loomed deeper. "They were *falling back*."

A new sound rumbled from the abyss below.

A deep, echoing *growl*.

Pigrim paled. “You’ve *got* to be joking.”

Rogrim tightened his grip on his mace. “Lad… we’re not done yet.”

Something *massive* stirred in the depths.

The growl that rumbled from the depths of the tunnel was not just sound—it was a *presence*, a force that seemed to press against the walls and seep into their bones. The air itself felt heavier, charged with an unseen malice that made even Rogrim pause.

Pigrim, still catching his breath from the skittering horrors they had just fought, took one step back. “Rogrim… I think I’ve reached my limit for nightmare creatures tonight.”

The dwarf ignored him, eyes locked on the darkness ahead. The glow of the creatures’ eyes had vanished, but the silence that followed was worse. Whatever was down there was something *else*—something more terrifying than the chittering horrors that had fled before it.

And then, from the black, came the voice.

Low. *Resonant*. It did not whisper like the spirits above, nor did it skitter like the creatures before. It *boomed*, like a great chasm splitting open.

"Who... disturbs... my slumber?"

Pigrim’s entire body tensed. “Nope. Absolutely not. When the *thing in the dark* starts talking, that’s when we *leave*.”

Rogrim, however, stepped forward, gripping his mace. “We are warriors of justice! We come to cleanse this place of wickedness and restore the Golden Tankard!”

Silence followed. Then, a deep, throaty *laugh*.

"Justice?" The voice rolled over them like distant thunder. *"You speak of justice, yet you trespass into my domain. Bold words for a mortal soon to perish."*

Rogrim scowled. “Enough riddles! Show yourself, fiend, so I may smite you properly!”

The ground trembled.

A pair of *massive* eyes flared open in the black, *glowing* like molten gold. A massive *shape* stirred, its form stretching beyond the reach of the lantern’s dim glow. A pair of clawed hands, *too large*, emerged from the darkness, dragging forward the being that had slumbered below the brewery for who knew how long.

Then, its full form came into view.

A *monstrous*, ancient *toad-like creature*, covered in blackened scales and twisted runes. A maw lined with *jagged teeth*, drool sizzling as it hit the stone. Its body, massive enough to fill the tunnel, was hunched, but its eyes *stared straight into them*.

Pigrim made a strangled noise. “Rogrim. *What in the Nine Hells is that?!*”

The dwarf didn’t blink. “A demon.”

The creature grinned, revealing rows of *impossible* fangs. *"Clever. Yes, dwarf, I am one of the old things, buried beneath your stone halls before your kind ever raised a hammer. And now… I am awake."*

It *lunged*.

Rogrim barely got his shield up in time before a *massive* clawed hand swiped toward him, sending him *skidding* backward across the wet stone. Pigrim screamed and ducked as the creature’s tongue—a long, whip-like thing—*lashed out*, missing him by mere inches.

“Rogrim! This is *above our pay grade!*”

Rogrim spat dust, pushing himself up. “A *paladin* does not flee from darkness!”

Pigrim threw up his hands. “You’re *not a paladin!*”

The beast roared, shaking the very tunnel. The shadows seemed to *writhe* around it, tendrils of dark energy reaching toward them.

Rogrim narrowed his eyes. “Then I shall prove myself worthy.”

The dwarf *charged*.

He brought his mace *down* on the demon’s outstretched claw, a *sickening crunch* ringing through the cavern as bone cracked. The creature *bellowed*, swiping wildly, but Rogrim ducked under its next attack, slamming his shield into its side.

Pigrim, still looking for a good escape route, groaned. “Oh, for the love of—” He drew his sword and darted forward, aiming for the creature’s underbelly. “If I die down here, I’m haunting you forever!”

The demon twisted, its *massive* bulk moving with unnatural speed. Its *glowing eyes* locked onto Pigrim, and suddenly, the halfling *froze*.

He wasn’t paralyzed physically—but something *else* gripped him. Something that sent *visions* flooding into his mind. *Fire. Endless tunnels. A city collapsing into ruin.*

"Your kind," the voice slithered into his head, *"were always weak. Small. Easy to swallow."*

Rogrim *roared* from behind.

"By the *FORGEFATHER’S WRATH*—BEGONE, CREATURE!"

The dwarf slammed his *mace* into the beast's skull.

A *shockwave* of energy burst from the impact. Not magic, not divine power—just *pure*, righteous fury. The demon shrieked, its spell over Pigrim *breaking* as it reeled backward, black ichor spilling from its forehead.

Pigrim gasped, stumbling back. "Rogrim—*whatever you just did, do it again!*"

The demon howled, its broken claw curling inward. *"You... cannot... stop me. I will rise... I will feast..."*

Rogrim gritted his teeth. He felt the pain in his arm, the exhaustion weighing on his body. But he *would not fall*.

"*You shall do no such thing.*"

The dwarf lifted his shield and *charged*, bashing into the creature with all his might. The demon staggered, slipping on the wet stone—its weakened body *collapsing* toward the old support beams in the tunnel.

A creaking *crack* split the air.

The old dwarven supports *snapped*.

Pigrim's eyes widened. "Ohhhh no—"

The tunnel *collapsed*.

Stone rained down in a massive avalanche. The demon *screamed*, thrashing as the weight of the collapsing tunnel buried it. Rogrim barely had time to grab Pigrim by the collar before they both *bolted*, running back toward the entrance.

Dust and debris chased them, the ground shaking beneath their feet.

They *burst* into the brewery cellar just as the tunnel *sealed* behind them, the final echoes of the demon's rage fading beneath tons of rock.

Silence followed.

Rogrim panted, hands on his knees. Pigrim lay flat on his back, wheezing.

The halfling finally spoke. "That. Was. HORRIFYING."

Rogrim spat onto the ground. "And *righteous*."

Pigrim sat up, groaning. "That thing is dead, right? Buried forever? No chance of an *unfortunate sequel*?"

Rogrim shrugged. "If it crawls out again, we'll just send it back."

Pigrim scowled. "*You* will. *I'm* leaving the next demon to a *real* paladin."

Chuckling, Rogrim patted his shoulder. "Come, lad. We've a brewery to restore."

With that, the two made their way out of the cellar, battered, exhausted… and victorious.

As Rogrim and Pigrim stumbled out of the brewery cellar, covered in dust, sweat, and the lingering stench of whatever unholy ichor the demon had oozed, the cool night air of Gandor felt like a gift from the gods. The streets were quieter now, the tavern lights flickering in the distance.

Pigrim groaned, rubbing his sore limbs. "So, just to summarize: We got attacked by ghost whispers, nearly eaten by spider-demons, fought an ancient beer crypt monster, and nearly got *buried alive*. All for a *brewery*."

Rogrim grinned, clapping the halfling on the back with a force that nearly sent him face-first into the dirt. "Aye, lad! And we *won*! That's what matters!"

Pigrim scowled. "Matters to *who*? Brumli's the one getting his brewery back! All we got was a new fear of dark tunnels and probably lung damage from all that dust!"

Rogrim sniffed and adjusted his belt. "A paladin does not seek reward. He does what is *just*."

Pigrim shot him a glare. "You're still *not* a paladin."

Rogrim ignored him and pressed forward. "Come, lad. We must report our victory."

They made their way through the empty streets until they reached Brumli's home, a stout stone dwelling nestled between two larger buildings. Rogrim rapped on the door with his fist, and after a few moments, the old brewer cracked it open, his tired eyes widening at the sight of them.

"By the ale gods, you're alive!" Brumli yanked the door open and ushered them inside. "Come in! What happened? Did you find the ghost? Are the spirits banished?"

Rogrim strode in with all the confidence of a victorious war hero. "No ghosts, Brumli. Your problem was a *demon*—a *big* one."

Brumli paled. "A… a demon? In my *brewery*?!"

Pigrim slumped into a chair, stretching out his legs. "Oh, don't worry, it's dead now. Or at least buried under a *mountain* of rock."

Brumli ran a hand through his beard, looking somewhere between horrified and amazed. "I knew the brewery was old, but demons?! That's a *new* one." He shook his head and sighed. "Well, if it's dealt with, then Moradin bless you both. I owe you my livelihood."

Rogrim beamed. "Aye, that you do."

Brumli gave a knowing smile and turned toward a cabinet. “I suppose I did mention free drinks for a *month*, didn’t I?”

Pigrim shot up in his chair. “Now *that’s* proper compensation!”

The old brewer pulled out a large wooden keg, stamped with the emblem of The Golden Tankard. He set down three mugs, filling them to the brim with frothy golden ale. “The least I can do. Drink up, heroes!”

Rogrim took a deep swig, his eyes rolling back in bliss. “By the gods, Brumli, this is *divine*.”

Pigrim smacked his lips after a sip. “Tastes like *not dying*.”

Brumli chuckled. “I’ll have the place cleaned up and running again within the week. And when the doors open again, I expect you both to be there as honored guests.”

Rogrim grinned. “We wouldn’t miss it.”

They drank deep into the night, toasting their survival, the return of The Golden Tankard, and, in Pigrim’s case, the sincere hope of *never* crawling through cursed tunnels again.

Rogrim woke with a headache the size of a war hammer. His mouth was dry, his limbs ached, and his beard felt… sticky.

Pigrim was sprawled on the floor beside him, snoring lightly, an empty mug still in his hand.

Rogrim groaned, sitting up. “Lad… did we *sleep here*?”

Pigrim cracked one eye open. “I think I *died* here.”

Brumli’s laughter echoed from the kitchen. “Ha! A proper dwarven night, if I’ve ever seen one!”

Rogrim stood, rubbing his temples. “Right. A new day, a new adventure.”

Pigrim groaned. “No. *No new adventures.* Just breakfast.”

Brumli set a plate of steaming bread and bacon on the table. “Eat first. Then you can figure out where the road takes you next.”

Rogrim sat, tearing into the food with enthusiasm. The battle against the demon had been harrowing. But now, with a full belly and a fresh pint in hand, he felt ready to face *whatever* lay ahead.

Pigrim, however, was already planning how to *avoid* the next catastrophe.

Serving Justice

The morning sun bathed Gandor in warm golden light as Rogrim and Pigrim made their way back to *The Misty Mug*. The streets were already bustling—merchants called out their wares, horses clattered along the cobblestones, and city guards watched over the crowds with sharp eyes.

Pigrim yawned, stretching his arms. “I don’t know about you, but I wouldn’t mind a *boring* day for once. No ghosts, no demons, no collapsing tunnels.”

Rogrim smiled. “And what would you do, then? Nap in a tavern? Gamble away your silver?”

Pigrim grinned. “You say that like it’s a *bad* idea.”

The dwarf chuckled as they stepped into the familiar, smoky interior of *The Misty Mug*. The scent of roasted meat and fresh bread filled the air, mingling with the bitter tang of ale. The usual crowd was there—merchants sharing stories, off-duty guards nursing tankards, and in the corner, the same bard plucking away at his lute.

Behind the bar, Orlin, the innkeeper, greeted them with a nod. “Ah, my favorite troublemakers! Brumli came by earlier, singing your praises. Says The Golden Tankard will be open again within the week. Seems you two did something right.”

Rogrim leaned against the counter. “Aye, just another day’s work for the righteous.”

Pigrim muttered, “And for his unpaid assistant.”

Orlin chuckled, pouring them each a fresh tankard. “Well, enjoy this one, lads. You might not have much time to relax.”

Rogrim raised an eyebrow. “Oh? What trouble brews now?”

The innkeeper leaned in slightly, lowering his voice. “Word around the city is that Lord Alric Vendrell, one of Gandor’s noblemen, is accused of using *dark magic* to curse his rivals. People are whispering, but no one knows what’s truth and what’s rumor.”

Rogrim frowned. “Dark magic? That’s not an accusation to be thrown lightly.”

Orlin nodded. “Exactly. The city magistrate, Sir Edric Thorne, has been struggling with this case. The evidence is thin, but people are demanding justice. He needs someone impartial, someone devoted to truth and I suggested you.”

Rogrim grinned. “And naturally, he thought of *me*.”

Pigrim sighed. “Naturally.”

Orlin smiled. “Aye. Thorne wants to meet you at the courthouse. He’ll explain everything himself.”

Rogrim downed the rest of his ale, slamming the tankard onto the counter. “Then let us waste no time! A paladin must see justice done.”

Pigrim groaned. “You’re *still* not a paladin.”

Rogrim ignored him and marched toward the door, Pigrim reluctantly following.

Justice awaited.

The grand courthouse of Gandor loomed ahead, its white stone pillars standing tall against the morning sun. The scales of justice were carved above the entrance, a solemn reminder that truth and law ruled within these walls. Rogrim strode forward with purpose, while Pigrim lagged slightly behind, already dreading what nonsense they were about to step into.

“This better not involve demons again,” Pigrim muttered. “Or spiders. Or cursed breweries.”

Rogrim scoffed. “Justice takes many forms, lad. One must be prepared to battle evil *in all its guises*.”

Pigrim rolled his eyes. “Aye, aye. But if ‘evil’ turns out to be some noble with a grudge and a bad temper, I’d rather let the *real* lawmen deal with it.”

Inside, the courthouse was a place of hushed voices and measured footsteps. Clerks scurried about with stacks of parchment, magistrates held quiet discussions, and city guards stood watch over those awaiting judgment. A tall man in a dark robe stood at the far end of the hall, speaking with a group of scribes. He had sharp features, graying hair, and a commanding presence—this was Sir Edric Thorne, Gandor’s magistrate.

He turned as Rogrim and Pigrim approached, his keen eyes scanning them. “Ah. The warriors of The Golden Tankard.”

Rogrim gave a proud nod. “Aye, and now we seek a new cause. Orlin said you had need of justice.”

Thorne folded his arms. “Indeed. A matter both delicate and dangerous.” He gestured for them to follow, leading them into a private chamber where the walls were lined with books and legal scrolls. Once the door was shut, he spoke plainly.

“Lord Alric Vendrell, a noble of this city, stands accused of practicing *dark magic* against his rivals. Several merchants claim misfortune struck them after disputes with him—crops failing, ships sinking, sudden sickness. One even swears he *saw* Vendrell muttering curses beneath the moonlight.”

Pigrim leaned against a bookshelf. “That sounds *very* circumstantial.”

Thorne sighed. “Exactly. That is why I need *unbiased* investigators. The noble houses want this matter buried, but if Alric is *truly* guilty, justice must be done.”

Rogrim crossed his arms. “What do you need from us? I am a paladin, I will see justice served !”

“Three things,” Thorne said, raising a finger. “First, speak with those who claim to be his victims—merchants, rival noblemen, anyone who has accused him. Find out if there is truth behind their words, or mere gossip.”

A second finger. “Second, investigate whether magic is truly at play. A curse is not proven simply because a man falls ill. Consult a wizard, a cleric—someone who can *confirm* if dark magic lingers.”

A third finger. “And lastly, if he is guilty, we need *proof*—solid evidence to present in court. Without it, the noble houses will dismiss the case as hearsay.”

Pigrim sighed. “And what if he *is* guilty? What if he just packs up his fancy robes and runs?”

Thorne’s expression darkened. “Then you *catch* him.”

Rogrim grinned. “A chase through the city streets? *Now* you speak my language.”

Thorne nodded. “I trust you will handle this with discretion. Lord Vendrell is *powerful*—his allies will try to obstruct your work. Some might even offer you… alternative incentives.”

Pigrim smiled. “Bribes, then.”

Thorne’s voice was firm. “Justice does not bow to gold.”

Rogrim pounded his chest. “A paladin’s honor *cannot* be bought!”

Pigrim muttered under his breath, “Still not a paladin…”

Thorne handed them a parchment with a list of names. “Start with these. Some are his accusers. Some are his allies. If you find anything suspicious, return to me immediately.”

Rogrim took the parchment and rolled it up. “Consider it done.”

As they left the courthouse, Pigrim glanced up at his companion. “So, how do we start? Interrogations? Sneaking into noble houses? Maybe we just bribe *him* first and save ourselves the trouble?”

Rogrim shot him a look.

Pigrim grinned. “Fine, fine. Lead on, oh righteous one.”

And with that, they set off into the city, ready to uncover the truth—wherever it led.

The streets of Gandor bustled with midday activity as Rogrim and Pigrim studied the parchment listing the names of those connected to Lord Alric Vendrell’s case. Merchants called out their wares, couriers weaved between carts, and noblemen strolled with their entourages, blissfully unaware that justice was now on their doorstep.

Pigrim peered over Rogrim’s shoulder. “So, who’s first on the ‘Who’s Who of Possibly Cursed People’ list?”

Rogrim traced a thick finger down the parchment. “A merchant named Gregor Wren, owner of Wren’s Fine Fabrics. He claims his business suffered after an argument with Vendrell.”

Pigrim smiled. “Let me guess—he lost some shipments and decided *magic* was to blame?”

Rogrim shrugged. “Only one way to find out.”

The shop was nestled in a row of wealthy storefronts, bolts of silk and velvet displayed in the window. Inside, the air smelled of lavender and fine linen, and a thin man with a carefully trimmed beard fussed over an elaborate green tunic.

At the sight of them, he clutched his chest dramatically. “Ah! You must be the ones sent by the magistrate. Terrible business, *terrible*!”

Rogrim folded his arms. “Tell us what happened.”

Wren sniffed, shaking his head. “I was once the city’s *most esteemed* supplier of noble finery! Then, that *wretched* Alric Vendrell disputed a shipment of silks—claimed they were *inferior* and refused to pay full price!”

Pigrim raised an eyebrow. “And that means he’s a sorcerer?”

Wren huffed. “Oh, it *started* with that. But then, suddenly, my shipments *vanished*! A ship carrying my finest imports *sank* just outside the harbor! My best tailor *fell ill*! And—” He gestured wildly at his shop. “Look at this place! It is nearly empty!”

Rogrim stroked his beard. “So, Vendrell refused to pay for silks, and then misfortune followed. Do you have any *proof* this was magic?”

Wren hesitated. “I… well, I *heard* him muttering under his breath as he left my shop. Something *dark*. I felt a chill in the air.”

Pigrim sighed. “Could’ve been *anything*. A draft, indigestion, the usual noble arrogance.”

Rogrim nodded. “We’ll need more than that to prove anything.”

Wren scowled. “You *think* I’m lying?”

Pigrim grinned. “Oh, I *know* you believe what you’re saying. That’s not the same as *it being true*.”

Rogrim held up a hand before the merchant could protest. “Thank you for your time. We’ll return if we need more questions answered.”

As they left, Pigrim muttered, “Well, that was useless.”

Rogrim grunted. “Not useless. It tells us how flimsy these accusations are. Let’s see what the others say.”

Their next visit took them to a grand estate, where Lord Branric Mournvale, a nobleman with a reputation for dueling and fine wine, awaited them in his lavish sitting room. A large hunting hound dozed by the fire, while Branric sipped from a goblet of deep red wine.

"I must say," he mused, swirling his drink, "it's about time someone looked into that *rat* Alric Vendrell."

Rogrim took a seat. "You believe he's guilty?"

Branric scoffed. "Oh, undoubtedly. He has always dabbled in strange arts. Never could beat me at cards, yet suddenly, *luck* favors him in every game. And not just luck—strange coincidences."

Pigrim leaned forward. "Strange how?"

Branric's lip curled. "Twice, I've bested him in *public wagers*. Both times, within the week, something ill befell me—my stables *caught fire* after the first, and after the second, my *own mother* fell sick."

Rogrim frowned. "Any real evidence he's to blame?"

Branric took another sip of wine. "I have *reason*. The man is *slippery*—and powerful men often have ways of avoiding proof."

Pigrim sighed. "So, another nobleman with bad luck blaming magic. Fantastic."

Branric smiled. "Oh, I have *more*. There is a *hedge mage* in the slums—a woman named Madam Lysara. She claimed to *sense* something unnatural around Vendrell. If you're serious about proving this case, she's the one you need to speak to."

Rogrim stood. "Then we shall."

Branric raised his glass. "I wish you luck. If Vendrell's power is what I suspect, you'll need it."

The slums of Gandor were a stark contrast to the noble district. The air was thick with the scent of sweat, damp wood, and city filth. They found Madam Lysara's dwelling tucked between two crumbling buildings, her door marked with strange symbols drawn in charcoal.

Inside, the old woman sat hunched over a worn table, her fingers adorned with rings of copper and bone. A single candle flickered between them, casting eerie shadows across her lined face.

"You seek answers," she rasped before they could speak.

Rogrim nodded. "We're investigating Lord Alric Vendrell. Some say he's using dark magic."

Lysara's yellowed eyes gleamed. "And you seek the truth, not just the words of bitter rivals?"

Rogrim placed his hands on the table. "Aye."

Lysara studied them, then produced a small glass vial filled with dark, murky liquid. She swirled it, whispering in a language Rogrim did not recognize.

When she looked up, her expression was grim. “There *is* magic around him. Foul magic. But not *his*.”

Pigrim frowned. “Meaning?”

Lysara leaned forward. “Someone *else* is weaving this web. Vendrell is not the spider. He is the *fly*.”

Rogrim exhaled. “Then someone *wants* him to take the fall.”

Lysara nodded. “Look deeper. Not at the man accused, but at the *ones pointing fingers*.”

As they left, Pigrim groaned. “Great. So now we *don’t* have a dark sorcerer—just a noble caught in someone else’s game.”

Rogrim cracked his knuckles. “Then it’s time to set the board straight.”

Someone wanted Alric Vendrell guilty.

Now they just had to find out *why*.

The pieces of the puzzle were coming together, but the picture they formed was not the one Gandor’s nobles had painted. Rogrim and Pigrim walked through the streets, their thoughts heavy. If Lord Alric Vendrell wasn’t the mastermind behind the misfortunes plaguing his rivals, then someone else was orchestrating the entire scheme.

Pigrim rubbed his temples. “Alright, let’s go through this again. We’ve got a merchant who swears he heard a *mystical curse* over some fabric, a nobleman who blames bad luck and fire on magic, and a hedge mage who says Vendrell’s got magic *around* him, but it’s not *his*.”

Rogrim nodded. “Meaning, either someone is *framing* Vendrell, or they’re using magic near him in a way that makes him look guilty.”

Pigrim sighed. “And I’d bet my last silver that someone high up wants him gone.”

Rogrim stroked his beard. “Aye. But we need more than suspicions. If someone set him up, we need proof.”

Pigrim snapped his fingers. “What about Vendrell himself? We’re doing all this running around, but we haven’t spoken to the man *accused* of being a dark sorcerer. Maybe he knows something.”

Rogrim nodded. “A good thought, lad. Let’s pay Lord Vendrell a visit.”

The estate of Lord Alric Vendrell was a grand home of polished stone and iron-wrought gates, but despite its beauty, there was a tension in the air. The guards at the entrance looked

uneasy, their hands lingering near their sword hilts. They exchanged wary glances as Rogrim and Pigrim approached.

One of them stepped forward. “Lord Vendrell is not taking visitors.”

Rogrim crossed his arms. “We’re here on *official business* for the magistrate.”

The guard hesitated, then nodded. “Fine. But don’t take too long. There’s been… trouble.”

Inside, the manor was eerily quiet. Rogrim had expected luxury, but instead, the halls were dimly lit, and there was a tension in the air, like the walls themselves were holding their breath.

A steward led them to Vendrell’s study, where the noble sat behind a heavy wooden desk. Lord Alric Vendrell was a gaunt man with silver-streaked hair, his fine clothes slightly disheveled, dark circles under his eyes. He looked more like a man burdened with worry than an evil sorcerer.

He studied them with tired suspicion. “So. The magistrate has sent his *agents* to bring me to trial?”

Rogrim shook his head. “We’re here to find the *truth*. And the truth, so far, does not favor your accusers.”

Vendrell blinked. “You don’t believe I did this?”

Pigrim shrugged. “Let’s just say we’ve met some dramatic noblemen with an impressive ability to blame all their problems on magic.”

Vendrell exhaled, rubbing his face. “Then you are the first. The others—merchants, nobles, even my own *friends*—have turned their backs on me.”

Rogrim took a step forward. “Tell us the truth, Lord Vendrell. Have you *ever* practiced magic?”

Vendrell met his gaze. “No.” His voice was firm. “I have no skill with magic, nor have I ever studied it. My father, my grandfather—none of my house have ever been mages.”

Pigrim narrowed his eyes. “Then why do people *think* you’re cursing them?”

Vendrell sighed. “Because someone *wants* them to.” He leaned forward, lowering his voice. “I have spent years gathering influence in Gandor’s court, and I have made rivals. Not by treachery, but by being in their way. There are *powerful people* who would rather see me *disgraced* than sit among them.”

Rogrim frowned. “Do you have any enemies in particular?”

Vendrell hesitated. “Perhaps… Lord Mournvale.”

Pigrim groaned. “Of *course* it’s him.”

Vendrell nodded. “Mournvale has always resented me. I have bested him in business and in court. He speaks well, he is clever, and he surrounds himself with allies. If *he* is behind this, he would not act alone.”

Rogrim exhaled. “So we need to prove that *he* is the one setting you up.”

Pigrim smiled. “Which means sneaking into Mournvale’s affairs, poking around where we’re not welcome, and making *very* powerful people *very* angry.”

Rogrim grinned. “Sounds like a *proper* investigation.”

Vendrell gave them a cautious look. “If you truly mean to prove my innocence, you must be careful. Mournvale has *friends*. If they learn you are working against him, they will not sit idly by.”

Rogrim pounded his fist into his palm. “Let them try.”

Pigrim sighed. “Oh, good. Another day, another noble conspiracy. Just once, I’d like to solve a problem that *doesn’t* involve pissing off people who can have us thrown into dungeons.”

Rogrim turned toward the door. “Come, lad. If we’re going to prove Vendrell’s innocence, we have work to do.”

As they stepped back into the city streets, the weight of their task settled upon them. Lord Mournvale had spun a careful web of deceit. Now, it was time to *tear it apart*.

The warm afternoon sun did little to ease the tension settling over Rogrim and Pigrim as they strode through the streets of Gandor. Their mission was clear—if Lord Alric Vendrell had been framed, then Lord Branric Mournvale was the spider at the center of the web. But they needed proof.

Pigrim adjusted his belt as they walked. “So, just to be clear, our current plan is to go poking around the affairs of a *powerful noble* who may or may not have half the city under his thumb?”

Rogrim nodded. “Aye.”

Pigrim sighed. “And when they inevitably try to have us *killed*?”

Rogrim grinned. “Then we’ll know we’re on the right path.”

The halfling groaned. “By all means, let’s *run* straight into danger. Maybe we can take bets on how quickly we get thrown into the dungeons.”

Rogrim ignored him, focusing instead on their first step—finding evidence. If Mournvale had orchestrated the accusations against Vendrell, there had to be a trail. And that meant following his associates.

Their first stop was a well-known wine house, The Gilded Grape, where a merchant named Halwin Tressel operated. Word on the streets was that Halwin had close ties to Mournvale—and had been one of the first to *publicly* support the accusations against Vendrell.

Inside the wine house, the scent of aged oak and spiced red wine filled the air. Rogrim and Pigrim took a seat at a corner table, watching as Halwin—a rotund man with slicked-back hair and rings on every finger—laughed loudly with a group of nobles.

Pigrim leaned in. "He *looks* like the type who would frame someone for the right price."

Rogrim smiled. "Then let's see if he talks for *our* price."

Halwin eventually wandered toward the bar, and Rogrim took his chance, stepping beside him. "Fine establishment you have here."

Halwin barely glanced at him. "Aye, the finest in Gandor."

Rogrim leaned in slightly. "I hear you deal in *many* things, not just wine."

Halwin stiffened slightly but recovered quickly. "Depends on who's asking."

Pigrim slid onto a stool beside Rogrim. "We're asking."

The merchant studied them, his smile returning. "Ah. And what business would two wandering adventurers have with a man of my *refined* stature?"

Rogrim smiled. "The business of *justice*."

Halwin's smile faltered for half a second before he forced a chuckle. "Justice? My dear dwarf, I sell *wine*, not law."

Pigrim took a sip from a random cup on the bar. "Not *yet* convinced."

Rogrim placed a few silver pieces on the counter. "I hear you were one of the first to speak against Lord Vendrell."

Halwin picked up a silver coin, rolling it between his fingers. "And?"

Rogrim leaned in. "And I'd like to know who *paid* you to do it."

Halwin chuckled, shaking his head. "That's a dangerous accusation."

Rogrim's voice dropped lower. "Not as dangerous as what happens to those caught interfering with the magistrate's work."

The merchant's fingers twitched, the coin slipping slightly in his grip. He hesitated, then let out a sigh. "Alright. I don't know the full picture, but someone *did* approach me. A man named Kellen Dreth—works for Lord Mournvale. Said it would be *profitable* for me to speak out against Vendrell."

Pigrim smiled. “And you like profit.”

Halwin shrugged. “It’s the nature of business.”

Rogrim took back one of his coins. “And where might we *find* this Kellen Dreth?”

Halwin hesitated, then sighed. “He spends most evenings at The Velvet Quill, an upscale gambling hall.”

Rogrim clapped him on the back. “Much obliged.”

As they left, Pigrim grinned. “Well, that was easy.”

Rogrim chuckled. “A greedy man always has a price. Now, let’s go meet the man pulling the strings.”

The Velvet Quill was a place of whispered deals and expensive drinks, a favorite haunt of nobles and merchants alike. Candles flickered against red-draped walls, the clinking of coin and dice filling the air.

Rogrim and Pigrim made their way inside, scanning the tables for Kellen Dreth. It didn’t take long to find him—a sharp-eyed man in fine, dark clothing, sitting at a table with a glass of wine and a hand of cards.

Rogrim wasted no time. He walked straight up to the table and dropped into the seat across from him. Pigrim followed, casually flipping a gold coin between his fingers.

Kellen looked up, his expression unreadable. “You’re not invited to this game.”

Rogrim smiled. “We’re playing a different one.”

Kellen sighed, setting his cards down. “Let me guess. You’re here about Lord Vendrell.”

Pigrim feigned surprise. “How ever did you guess?”

Kellen swirled his wine. “Because you’re not the first ones to ask. But you *are* the first to come so *boldly*.”

Rogrim leaned forward. “Then let’s not waste time. You framed Vendrell.”

Kellen chuckled. “Framed? No, no. I simply… *guided* the truth to where it needed to be.”

Pigrim whistled. “That’s a fancy way of saying *lying*.”

Kellen exhaled, leaning back. “Mournvale wanted Vendrell *discredited*. That’s all. A few rumors, a few ‘misfortunes’ arranged, and suddenly, the city wants him in chains.”

Rogrim’s grip tightened on his tankard. “And the magic? The real magic that *was* sensed?”

Kellen hesitated, then smiled. “That’s a little secret of mine.”

Rogrim slammed his fist onto the table. "*Talk.*"

Kellen sighed. "Fine. There *was* magic, but it wasn't Vendrell's. Mournvale hired a *real* mage to make sure things looked convincing. A spell here, a sickness there."

Pigrim grinned. "And *who* is this mage?"

Kellen hesitated. "Look, I don't want to die over this."

Rogrim smiled coldly. "Then tell us, and you *won't.*"

After a long pause, Kellen sighed. "A man called Edran Vale. A rogue wizard. He's been hiding out in an old watchtower beyond the city walls."

Rogrim stood. "That's all we need."

Kellen shook his head. "You're making a mistake."

Pigrim smiled. "Wouldn't be the first time."

As they stepped out into the cool night air, Rogrim cracked his knuckles. "One last stop, lad."

Pigrim sighed. "A rogue wizard, huh? Can we go *one* week without fighting something that shoots lightning?"

Rogrim grinned. "Where would be the fun in that?"

The truth was finally in their grasp. Now, they just had to take it.

The wind howled through the open plains outside Gandor, carrying the scent of damp earth and wild grass. The old watchtower loomed ahead, a crumbling relic of the past, its stone walls cracked and weathered by time.

Rogrim and Pigrim stood at a distance, studying the structure. A faint, unnatural glow pulsed from one of the upper windows, casting eerie flickers of green and blue against the night sky.

Pigrim sighed. "Alright. Let's go over this *one more time*. A *rogue wizard*—one who curses people for coin—is hiding in *that* tower."

Rogrim nodded. "Aye."

"And we," Pigrim continued, "two *very non-magical* individuals, are going to march right in and demand he confesses to framing Vendrell?"

"Aye."

Pigrim pinched the bridge of his nose. "Right. Just wanted to confirm how *stupid* this plan is."

Rogrim grinned, adjusting his grip on his mace. “Come now, lad. A wizard is still just a man—just one who cheats in a fight.”

Pigrim groaned. “They *all* cheat.”

The tower’s entrance was a heavy wooden door reinforced with iron bands. Rogrim tested the handle—locked.

Pigrim pulled out a small knife and grinned. “Lucky for you, I happen to have a very *useful* set of skills.”

Rogrim crossed his arms. “Lockpicking isn’t *justice*, Pigrim.”

“Neither is getting blown up by a wizard because we *knocked*,” Pigrim muttered, jamming the blade into the lock.

With a soft *click*, the door creaked open. Rogrim shot Pigrim a look.

Pigrim shrugged. “Justice is faster when you cheat, too.”

They stepped inside, finding themselves in a dimly lit chamber lined with dusty bookshelves and half-melted candles. The air was thick with the scent of old parchment, burning incense, and something *foul*, like rotting herbs.

Footsteps echoed from above. A voice muttered arcane words, low and deliberate.

Rogrim gripped his mace. “He’s here.”

Ascending the stone staircase, they reached the tower’s top chamber, where Edran Vale stood hunched over a wooden table cluttered with scrolls, vials, and a single, floating crystal pulsating with eerie green light.

He was an older man, his once-noble robes frayed at the edges, his long gray hair unkempt. When he noticed them, he sighed and turned, his expression weary rather than alarmed.

“Ah. More interruptions.” He rubbed his temples. “Let me guess. Here to kill me? Arrest me? Complain about curses?”

Rogrim stepped forward. “We’re here for the *truth*.”

Edran smiled. “And what makes you think you’ll get it?”

Rogrim slammed his shield on the ground, the echoing *boom* rattling the chamber. “Because I’ll *take* it if I must.”

Edran chuckled. “Bold words for a man standing in a wizard’s tower.”

Pigrim cleared his throat. “Yes, yes, we’re all very impressed with your ominous lair. But we know you worked for Lord Mournvale. We know you cast the curses that made Vendrell look guilty.”

Edran sighed, rubbing his eyes. “Of course you do. Mournvale couldn’t just let this fade away, could he?”

Rogrim frowned. “Wait. You think *Mournvale* sent us?”

The wizard blinked, then let out a low chuckle. “Ah. I see. No, you’re just two fools who stumbled into something *much bigger* than you realize.”

Rogrim tightened his grip on his mace. “Then start explaining.”

Edran leaned back against the table, crossing his arms. “Yes, I cast the spells. A bit of misfortune here, a bit of sickness there. Subtle work—nothing too obvious. Mournvale paid well for it.”

Pigrim scowled. “So, you admit to framing Vendrell?”

Edran shrugged. “I didn’t *frame* him—I just helped *push* things in the right direction.”

Rogrim growled. “And you think that’s any better?”

The wizard waved a hand dismissively. “Mournvale had a *reason* to get rid of Vendrell, and it wasn’t just noble squabbles.”

Rogrim narrowed his eyes. “What reason?”

Edran hesitated. For the first time, his smug expression faltered.

Pigrim caught the shift immediately. “Ah. So *you’re* afraid of something.”

Edran let out a slow breath. “You don’t understand. This city—its *nobles*—they don’t just fight over land and titles. They fight over *power*.”

Rogrim’s patience thinned. “What *power*?”

Edran glanced at the floating crystal beside him. “Magic. Influence. The kind of things that can make or unmake kingdoms.”

Pigrim folded his arms. “So, let me guess. Vendrell got close to something *important*—too important for Mournvale’s liking.”

Edran nodded slowly. “He found something. Something buried beneath the city, something *old*.”

Rogrim stiffened. “What did he find?”

Edran shook his head. “I don’t know. But Mournvale was *terrified* of it. That’s why he needed Vendrell *gone*. The curses, the false accusations—it was all just a way to remove him before he uncovered too much.”

Pigrim whistled. “And let me guess—you’re not allowed to live with that knowledge either.”

Edran's smile returned, but it was strained. "Oh, Mournvale will try to clean up his mess. That's what he *does*. But…" He gestured at the crystal. "I have my own *precautions*."

Rogrim tensed. "Is that a threat?"

Edran grinned. "No, my *guests*. That's a *distraction*."

He raised his hand—and the floating crystal *shattered*.

A *shockwave* of energy burst through the room, sending Pigrim flying backward and knocking Rogrim to one knee. The walls shook, arcane symbols *flared* to life along the stone, and the floor beneath them *split*.

Edran's voice was distant, almost amused. "I do hate to run, but I prefer not to die today."

Through the dust and chaos, Rogrim saw the wizard moving toward a hidden passage behind the table.

He was escaping.

Pigrim coughed, picking himself up. "Rogrim, we *cannot* let that man leave."

Rogrim's fists clenched. "Aye. Then we run him down."

Without hesitation, the two charged forward, pushing through the crumbling tower as Edran Vale fled into the night.

The crumbling tower groaned as arcane energy crackled through its walls. Dust and debris rained down as Rogrim and Pigrim surged forward, chasing after Edran Vale, the rogue wizard who had framed Lord Vendrell.

Pigrim coughed, waving away a cloud of dust. "I *hate* wizards! Damn, it's either fire, lightning, or collapsing buildings!"

Rogrim gritted his teeth, leaping over a cracked section of the floor. "No time for complaints, lad! The scoundrel's getting away!"

Edran's robes billowed as he darted into a dark passage at the base of the tower, his silhouette vanishing into the gloom. Without hesitation, Rogrim charged after him, Pigrim close behind.

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The hidden passage twisted downward, narrow and uneven, leading into what appeared to be a series of forgotten tunnels. The air was damp, filled with the scent of mold and stagnant water. Their footsteps echoed off the stone as they pursued the fleeing wizard, Rogrim's heavy boots thundering behind him.

Ahead, Edran's voice rang out, his breath labored but his tone amused. "You're persistent, I'll give you that! But you have no idea what you're interfering with!"

Pigrim, panting, shot Rogrim a look. "Do *all* villains feel the need to gloat while running for their lives?"

Rogrim growled, gripping his mace tighter. "Only the ones who are about to get *caught*."

The tunnel abruptly opened into a massive underground chamber, its ceiling lost in shadow. Ancient dwarven carvings lined the walls, depicting long-forgotten battles and mysterious symbols. Large stone pillars, cracked with age, held the cavern aloft.

At the far end, Edran stumbled to a stop before an iron gate, its surface covered in glowing runes. He turned, raising a trembling hand. "You don't understand! This goes beyond Mournvale! Beyond your petty noble squabbles!"

Rogrim didn't slow. "Aye? Then by all means—stay put and explain it to me!"

Edran smiled. "I think not."

With a flick of his wrist, he threw a handful of black powder to the ground, and a blinding flash of light exploded through the chamber.

Pigrim cursed, covering his eyes. "Damn trickster magic—"

By the time their vision cleared, Edran was already forcing the iron gate open, slipping through and slamming it shut behind him.

Rogrim sprinted forward and slammed his shoulder against the gate, but the runes flared to life, sending a sharp *shockwave* that sent him stumbling back.

Pigrim, rubbing his eyes, caught up and winced. "Please tell me that's not magic locking us out."

Rogrim scowled, brushing soot from his beard. "Of course it's magic."

Beyond the gate, Edran's voice was distant but clear. "You're meddling in things bigger than you, dwarf. Bigger than Mournvale. If you're *wise*, you'll walk away."

Then, he was gone—vanishing into the depths of whatever lay beyond the ancient dwarven ruins.

Rogrim cursed under his breath. “Coward.”

Pigrim sighed, resting his hands on his knees. “Alright. We lost him. Now what?”

Rogrim studied the runes on the gate, his mind working through their options.

“First,” he muttered, “we get out of here.”

After retracing their steps through the crumbling tower, Rogrim and Pigrim emerged back into the cool night air. The watchtower now stood as a broken ruin, its upper floors partially collapsed from the wizard’s escape.

Rogrim let out a long breath. “We had him. *Damn it*.”

Pigrim stretched, cracking his neck. “Well, we *did* learn a few things.”

Rogrim grunted. “Aye. Mournvale hired Edran to frame Vendrell—but there’s *more* to it. That wizard was running toward *something* down there. And he was scared.”

Pigrim frowned. “Which means Mournvale isn’t the end of this mess.”

Rogrim turned toward the city. “Then we go back to Thorne. We tell him *everything*.”

The streets of Gandor were quieter at night, the usual bustle of merchants replaced by the occasional patrol of city guards. Rogrim and Pigrim moved quickly through the lamplit avenues, their minds racing after their narrow escape from Edran Vale’s collapsing tower.

Pigrim rubbed his tired eyes. “You know, I *really* thought we’d be done with this by now. Find a wizard, slap him around a bit, take him to court—simple. Instead, we’ve got mystery tunnels, magic doors, and cryptic warnings.”

Rogrim’s expression was grim. “Aye. And something tells me we’ve only scratched the surface.”

They reached the courthouse, where a pair of guards stiffened at their approach. Recognizing them, one led them inside to Sir Edric Thorne, who was reviewing documents in his candlelit office. The magistrate’s sharp eyes flicked up as they entered.

“You look like you’ve seen battle,” he noted.

Rogrim dropped into a chair with a grunt. “More than we bargained for.”

Pigrim sighed, flopping into another chair. “Long story short—Mournvale framed Vendrell, but there’s something worse underneath it all.”

Thorne set his quill down. “Explain.”

Rogrim laid it out. How Mournvale had orchestrated the accusations against Lord Vendrell, how he had hired Edran Vale to use *actual magic* to make the curses seem real, and how the

rogue wizard had fled into an ancient dwarven ruin beneath Gandor, sealing himself behind a rune-covered gate.

Thorne listened carefully, his fingers steepled. “Mournvale wanted Vendrell removed, but not just for power.” His voice was measured, thoughtful. “If Vendrell was getting too close to *something*, that suggests Mournvale was protecting a secret.”

Pigrim sat up. “Exactly. Edran was terrified. He didn’t run like a man who got caught doing *political sabotage*—he ran like a man who just woke something he shouldn’t have.”

Thorne exhaled. “And we don’t know what lies beyond that gate.”

Rogrim shook his head. “Not yet. But if we’re going to get to the bottom of this, we need to take care of Mournvale first.”

Thorne stood, pacing slightly. “If we publicly accuse Mournvale without proof, his allies will protect him. He’ll make counter-claims, and this entire case will fall apart.”

Pigrim raised an eyebrow. “So what you’re saying is… we need him to admit it?”

Thorne nodded. “In a way that leaves no doubt.”

Rogrim cracked his knuckles. “Then we set a *trap*.”

They devised a plan—one that would either bring Mournvale’s guilt into the light or get them all thrown into prison.

The next morning, rumors spread through Gandor: Lord Vendrell was preparing his own counter-accusation. Word was that he had new evidence against whoever framed him—and he would soon present it before the magistrate.

The message was clear: Mournvale’s scheme was unraveling.

Pigrim smiled as they left the courthouse. “Think he’ll panic?”

Rogrim’s grin was wolfish. “If he’s truly guilty, he’ll do more than that. He’ll act.”

That evening, a message arrived at Vendrell’s estate—sealed with Lord Branric Mournvale’s crest.

It read:

"Meet me at the abandoned chapel on the east road at midnight. We must discuss what happens next."

Pigrim whistled. “That’s the *shadiest* letter I’ve ever seen.”

Rogrim nodded. “Aye. And exactly what we wanted.”

Vendrell glanced between them, his expression wary. “You realize this could be a trap?”

Rogrim smiled. “Aye. But that works both ways.”

At midnight, the ruined chapel stood silent, its broken stained glass glinting under the moonlight. The stone walls were weathered, covered in creeping ivy.

Rogrim and Pigrim waited in the shadows, hiding among the fallen pews. Vendrell stood in the open, acting the part of a man ready to *negotiate*.

Then, Mournvale arrived—but he did not come alone.

Six hired thugs spread out behind him, their hands on their weapons.

Mournvale strode forward, his fine coat swirling in the wind. “Vendrell. You’ve caused quite the mess.”

Vendrell folded his arms. “I could say the same to you.”

Mournvale smiled. “I think we both know how this ends.” He gestured lazily. “My associates here will ensure you *disappear*, and the city will move on.”

Pigrim muttered, “Well, he’s certainly not *subtle*.”

Rogrim grinned. “Time to make our move.”

He stepped from the shadows, mace in hand. “*You should’ve hired more men.*”

Mournvale whirled, his smile vanishing. “*What?!*”

Pigrim emerged beside Rogrim, drawing his sword. “*Surprise!*”

The thugs hesitated, caught off guard. Vendrell smiled, stepping back toward Rogrim and Pigrim’s side.

Mournvale’s face twisted in fury. “You set me up!”

Rogrim’s grin was fierce. “Aye. And you *walked* right into it.”

Mournvale’s men attacked.

One lunged for Rogrim, but the dwarf caught the blow on his shield before slamming his mace into the attacker’s ribs. The man crumpled with a pained wheeze.

Pigrim ducked under a wild swing and sliced his sword across a thug’s leg, sending him sprawling. “I am *way* too sober for this!”

Vendrell, despite being a noble, held his own—knocking one attacker to the ground with a swift knee to the gut.

Mournvale, seeing his men faltering, turned to flee.

Rogrim saw it instantly. “Oh no, you *don’t*.”

The dwarf charged, barreling into Mournvale like a boulder rolling downhill. The noble hit the ground hard, coughing as Rogrim planted a boot on his chest.

Rogrim grinned. “Going somewhere?”

By the time the fight ended, Mournvale’s men were either unconscious or groaning on the ground. The city guard, already alerted by Thorne earlier, arrived within minutes to secure the scene.

Mournvale struggled beneath Rogrim’s boot. “You *fools*! You think you’ve won?”

Pigrim crouched beside him. “We *know* we have.”

Vendrell knelt, watching as the guards restrained Mournvale. “Tell me, Branric—how does it feel to lose *everything*?”

Mournvale snarled. “You don’t know what you’ve done. You don’t know what’s *below Gandor*! If Vendrell had his way, we’d all be—”

Rogrim cut him off. “Save it for the trial.”

Mournvale was dragged away, and the city had its proof.

But Rogrim couldn’t shake his last words.

"You don’t know what’s below Gandor."

Something *was* beneath the city.

Something even Mournvale feared.

And Rogrim had a feeling this wasn’t over.

The morning after Lord Mournvale’s arrest, the city of Gandor buzzed with whispered conversations. News of the disgraced nobleman’s crimes spread quickly—how he had conspired to frame Lord Vendrell, how he had used a rogue wizard to cast real curses, and how he had nearly gotten away with it.

The courthouse was filled with officials, merchants, and nobles, all eager to witness Mournvale’s downfall. Rogrim and Pigrim stood at the back of the chamber, watching as Sir Edric Thorne read out the list of crimes.

Vendrell, now cleared of all wrongdoing, sat tall, his dignity restored. Mournvale, however, looked less like a noble and more like a *cornered rat*, his fine clothes disheveled, his wrists bound in iron shackles.

When Thorne finished, he fixed Mournvale with a piercing gaze. “You have been found guilty of conspiracy, bribery, and unlawful use of sorcery. Do you have *anything* to say in your defense?”

Mournvale lifted his head, and to Rogrim’s surprise, the noble’s expression was not one of rage or denial—it was one of *warning*.

“You’re making a mistake,” Mournvale said, his voice measured. “You think this ends with me? That you’ve won? *You haven’t*. The *real* threat is still beneath this city, waiting. When it rises, you’ll *wish* you had listened.”

A murmur ran through the courtroom.

Pigrim sighed. “They *always* have to leave us with some cryptic nonsense, don’t they?”

Rogrim frowned. “He’s stalling for time. Trying to make himself seem *important*.”

Thorne’s expression remained hard. “Your fate is already decided. You will spend the rest of your days imprisoned, stripped of title and land.”

The guards led Mournvale away. But his final words still lingered in Rogrim’s mind.

"You don’t know what’s below Gandor."

Later that evening, Rogrim and Pigrim sat in The Misty Mug, their well-earned drinks in hand. The tavern was more lively than usual—people celebrated Vendrell’s name while cursing Mournvale’s. The scandal had gripped the city, but for Rogrim, something still felt *unfinished*.

He took a long drink of ale before finally speaking. “We need to go back.”

Pigrim, mid-bite into a roast chicken leg, paused. “Go back *where*?”

Rogrim set his tankard down. “The ruins beneath the city. The ones Edran fled into. We never *opened* that gate.”

Pigrim wiped his mouth. “Yeah, and I was *very* happy leaving it that way.”

Rogrim shook his head. “Mournvale was afraid of something down there. He tried to stop Vendrell from discovering it. And Edran Vale? He didn’t just run—he sealed himself in. That means one of two things: either he’s protecting *something*, or he’s *hiding* from it.”

Pigrim groaned. “And instead of just *leaving it alone*, we’re going to poke it with a stick, aren’t we?”

Rogrim grinned. “Aye.”

Pigrim sighed dramatically, then took another bite of chicken. “Fine. But I swear, Rogrim, if this ends with us fighting *another demon*, I’m charging extra.”

The two finished their meal in relative peace, but the next day, they would return to the underground.

Because if Mournvale was afraid, then *so should they be.*

And Rogrim had never been one to ignore a challenge.

The next morning, Rogrim and Pigrim stood at the entrance to the collapsed watchtower, the ruins still bearing the scars of Edran Vale's escape. The city above had moved on—nobles whispering of scandal, merchants returning to business, but down here, something remained unfinished.

Pigrim adjusted his cloak, staring at the dark tunnel that led back underground. "You know, *normal* folk would just be happy with a job well done. Vendrell's free, Mournvale's rotting in a cell, and we're still alive. Seems like a good time to quit."

Rogrim grinned. "And let some *other* fool stumble onto this and wake something *worse*? Not a chance."

Pigrim groaned. "I hate when you make sense."

With torches lit, they descended into the underground ruins once more. The air was still thick with dampness and the lingering smell of dust and old magic. But this time, the oppressive silence felt *different*.

Something had changed.

As they retraced their path to the rune-covered gate where Edran had vanished, Rogrim felt a prickling unease. The glowing sigils, which had burned brightly before, were now flickering —weak, unsteady, as if whatever force had sealed the gate was failing.

Pigrim squinted. "Uh… that's not how it looked last time, right?"

Rogrim frowned. "No. Which means something's wrong."

They stepped closer, examining the runes. The once-solid barrier of magic now pulsed irregularly, and a faint, rhythmic thumping echoed from beyond the stone.

Pigrim's hand went to his sword. "I don't like this."

Rogrim didn't either. He reached out, touching one of the symbols. The moment his fingers brushed it, the runes flared—then shattered.

The air rushed inward, like a breath being drawn, and the heavy iron gate groaned open on its own.

Beyond it, the passage stretched downward into a black abyss, an ancient staircase leading into the unknown.

Rogrim turned to Pigrim. "Ready?"

Pigrim's expression was pure exasperation. "No. But let's do it anyway."

The staircase wound downward for what felt like an eternity, the air growing colder with every step. The walls, once carved with dwarven symbols, now bore new markings—deep gouges, unnatural scratches, as if something had clawed at the stone from the inside.

Pigrim ran a hand along one of the deep marks. "These are new. This isn't just ruins anymore, Rogrim. Something *woke up down here*."

Rogrim nodded, gripping his mace tighter. "Then we find out *what*."

Finally, the passage opened into a massive, forgotten hall—a cavernous space, far older than the city above. Enormous pillars, cracked with time, loomed in the dim torchlight. Strange, pulsing veins of green light ran along the walls, twisting through the stone like roots.

And at the center of it all, stood a massive stone door, dwarven-forged but covered in alien runes, shifting and twisting like they were alive.

Pigrim took one look at it and cursed. "Ohhh, no. This isn't just some old ruin, Rogrim. This is a sealed tomb."

Rogrim's stomach tightened. "Aye. And I think we just opened the first door."

Then, from beyond the sealed tomb, something knocked back.

A slow, heavy, booming sound, like a heartbeat echoing through the stone.

Pigrim swallowed hard. "Rogrim… tell me we're *not* about to unleash something horrible."

Rogrim exhaled, steadying himself. "I think we just found what Mournvale was afraid of."

The stone door shuddered, dust cascading from its ancient carvings.

Whatever was behind it had been waiting.

And now, it knew they were here.

The deep, *booming* knock echoed through the forgotten hall, shaking the dust loose from the ancient stone pillars. The veins of green light pulsed faster, as though responding to the noise—as though something behind the door was waking up.

Rogrim's grip tightened on his mace. He could feel it in his bones—this place was not meant to be disturbed.

Pigrim exhaled slowly. "Right. So, bad news: That thing's alive. Good news: *We haven't let it out yet.*"

The door shuddered again. Cracks spread along its surface, the old dwarven runes flaring with resistance, trying to hold against whatever pushed from the other side.

Rogrim took a step forward, studying the inscriptions. These were not just old runes—they were seals. *Wards of containment.*

“This isn’t a tomb,” he murmured. “It’s a prison.”

Pigrim groaned. “Oh, *wonderful.* And I assume whatever’s in there is locked up for a *very good reason*?”

Rogrim nodded. “Aye. And I’d wager it’s been trying to get out for a very long time.”

Then, the air changed. The temperature dropped sharply, and the distant hum of the glowing veins faded into silence.

And then—a voice.

It wasn’t a sound, not exactly. It was a presence, a whisper curling through their minds like cold fingers.

“You… have come…”

Pigrim flinched. “Tell me you heard that.”

Rogrim’s jaw tightened. “Aye.”

The voice—deep, ancient, hollow—spoke again.

"Long have I waited… the stone weakens… the blood of the forge lingers in you… open the way…"

Rogrim felt it—a pressure behind his eyes, an unnatural pull toward the door. It was trying to compel him, trying to draw him closer.

He fought it, planting his feet, gritting his teeth. “I don’t think so, beast.”

Pigrim took a step back, hand gripping his sword. “Okay. We need to leave. *Now.*”

But the whispering presence only grew stronger.

"You… bear the mark of stone and iron… you will serve… or you will break."

Rogrim roared in defiance, raising his shield. “*You do not command me!*”

The veins of green light pulsed violently—then died, plunging the chamber into near-total darkness.

And then… the scraping began.

It started slow, a distant *dragging* sound—stone on stone, metal on metal—somewhere behind them.

Pigrim turned sharply. “Rogrim—”

A shadow shifted at the edge of their torchlight.

Something was moving in the tunnels they had just come through.

Something watching.

Something that had been waiting.

Rogrim held up his torch, but the light only reached so far. Shapes lurked in the edges of the cavern—low, hunched figures, barely visible, their eyes glinting like distant embers.

Pigrim swallowed hard. “We are *not* alone.”

The whispering voice returned, but now… it was closer.

"The door must open… the blood must flow…"

Rogrim gritted his teeth. “Like hell it will.”

Then, from the darkness, *they came.*

The shadows lunged.

A clawed hand shot out, scraping across Rogrim’s shield with a shriek of metal. Another creature dropped from the ceiling, barely missing Pigrim, who rolled aside just in time.

Rogrim swung his mace, feeling it connect with something soft but unnatural—a *wet crunch* followed as the creature screeched and staggered back.

Pigrim, scrambling to his feet, drew his sword. “What in the cursed hells are these things?!”

The torchlight flickered, briefly illuminating them—twisted, elongated forms, humanoid in shape but wrong. Their arms were too long, their spines hunched, their skin dark and ridged like cracked stone.

Their eyes burned green—the same sickly glow that had pulsed through the cavern walls.

They were guardians. Prison keepers. Or prisoners themselves.

Rogrim didn’t care. “Pigrim—back to the tunnels! *Now!*”

Pigrim ducked another swipe, stabbed his sword upward—his blade punched through the creature’s ribs, and it let out a horrid, gurgling hiss before collapsing.

But more came.

Rogrim barreled forward, shield-slamming another attacker into a pillar. The creature shrieked, but Rogrim’s mace silenced it with a sickening *crack*.

Pigrim was already running toward the passage. “Rogrim, MOVE!”

The whispering voice roared in frustration.

"The seal must break… the door must open… YOU WILL NOT ESCAPE!"

A pulse of energy rippled through the chamber. The stone door shook violently, cracks spreading further—but it did not break.

The creatures reeled, as if pained by the failed attempt.

Rogrim saw their chance. “Go! *Go now!*”

The two raced back up the staircase, their torchlight barely holding back the darkness chasing them.

The whispering grew distant… the creatures did not follow past the threshold.

And as Rogrim and Pigrim stumbled back into the upper tunnels, the rune-sealed gate slammed shut behind them.

By the time they climbed out of the ruins and back into the ruined watchtower, the morning sun had risen. The warmth of daylight felt *wrong* after what they had just experienced.

Pigrim, catching his breath, glared at Rogrim. “Tell me—*tell me*—that we are *not* going back down there.”

Rogrim, still gripping his mace, stared at the dark entrance. “…Not yet.”

Pigrim threw up his hands. “Oh, fantastic!”

Rogrim turned toward the city. “We need to tell Thorne. And Vendrell.”

Pigrim’s eyes narrowed. “About what? That we almost unleashed something ancient and horrible?”

Rogrim exhaled. “About the fact that it’s trying to escape.”

Pigrim stared at him for a long moment, then groaned. “I hate this job.”

With the sun on their backs and the weight of a new horror in their minds, the two headed back to Gandor.

The streets of Gandor were already coming to life as Rogrim and Pigrim marched toward the courthouse. Merchants called out their wares, noble carriages rattled over the cobblestones, and city guards watched from the gatehouses.

To everyone else, it was a normal morning.

But Rogrim knew better.

The thing they had seen—the prison door that had nearly broken open—was still down there, waiting. Pushing.

And if it got out…

Pigrim, still rubbing the bruise on his arm from their fight in the ruins, muttered, "You know, Rogrim, we could just pretend this never happened. Let someone else deal with the horrible crypt monsters."

Rogrim snorted. "Aye, and let some *other fool* wander down there and get themselves killed? Then have the whole damn city *wondering* why people are vanishing?"

Pigrim sighed. "Right, right. Because we're *heroes* and all that."

Rogrim smiled. "Aye."

They reached the courthouse, where Sir Edric Thorne was already in discussion with Lord Vendrell. The nobleman looked far better than the last time they'd seen him—freshly shaven, dressed in a fine dark blue coat. But the moment he saw Rogrim's grimy, battle-worn appearance, his expression darkened.

"You found something."

Rogrim set his hands on the table and leaned in. "Aye. And you're not going to like it."

Thorne listened carefully as Rogrim described everything—the rune-sealed door, the whispering voice, the creatures that attacked them, and how the seal was weakening.

By the time Rogrim finished, the magistrate was gripping the arms of his chair tightly.

Vendrell, though calmer, looked pale. "So you're telling me… Mournvale wasn't just trying to *ruin* me. He was trying to keep me from uncovering something far worse."

Rogrim nodded. "Aye. And whatever's locked behind that door? It's still alive. Still waiting. And if we don't reinforce the seals, it's going to get out."

Thorne exhaled sharply. "If this is true, we must act. Immediately."

Pigrim lifted a hand. "Just a suggestion—how about we *don't* involve only *two people* next time we go down there?"

Thorne nodded. "Agreed. We'll need every wizard, priest, and rune-mage in the city to strengthen those seals."

Vendrell, still frowning, turned to Rogrim. "Did the voice say anything *specific*?"

Rogrim's expression darkened. "It called to me. Said I bore the 'blood of the forge.' Wanted me to open the way."

Thorne and Vendrell exchanged a glance.

The magistrate cleared his throat. “Rogrim… if this thing knows you, then we may need to consider that it is not just trapped—it is searching for a way out.”

Rogrim’s fists clenched. “Then it won’t get one.”

The room was silent for a moment. Then Thorne stood.

“We can’t risk panic in the city,” he said firmly. “But we will act. I will summon the High Cleric of Moradin and the Archmage of Gandor’s Circle. If these seals are failing, we *must* reinforce them—immediately.”

Vendrell nodded. “I’ll lend whatever resources I can. If Mournvale was right about one thing, it’s that this isn’t over.”

Rogrim smiled. “Good. Because I’m not done either.”

Pigrim groaned. “I was *afraid* you’d say that.”

Thorne turned to Rogrim. “For now, rest. We may need your strength before this is over.”

Rogrim nodded, but in his gut, he already knew—rest wouldn’t last long.

Because something down there was still waiting.

And soon, it would try again.

The halls of Gandor’s Courthouse had never felt so tense. Sir Edric Thorne worked quickly, sending messengers to the city’s highest authorities—the High Cleric of Moradin, the Archmage of the Circle, and even the Captain of the Guard.

The city would not be caught unprepared.

But as Rogrim and Pigrim sat in a quiet corner of the chamber, waiting, Rogrim couldn’t shake the feeling that they were already too late.

Something had changed down in those ruins. Something had awakened.

Pigrim rubbed his face, exhausted. “So, just to summarize—an ancient dwarven ruin is holding back some unspeakable horror, Mournvale tried to stop it in the worst way possible, and now we’re leading the charge into a possibly cursed crypt with the fate of the city on the line?”

Rogrim smiled. “Aye.”

Pigrim groaned. “By the gods, I miss dealing with *regular* criminals.”

Before Rogrim could respond, the doors to the chamber swung open.

A group of figures strode in—each of them powerful in their own right.

High Cleric Durnheim of Moradin, a grizzled, silver-bearded dwarf clad in ornate armor, his warhammer strapped to his back. His eyes burned with determination as he stepped forward.

“By my ancestors, if what you say is true, then this is no mere ruin. This is an abomination left to fester beneath our feet.”

Beside him stood Archmage Elyndra Valehart, a tall, robed elven woman with runes glowing faintly along her arms. Her violet eyes flickered with curiosity and concern.

“If ancient magic was used to seal something away, then I must see these runes for myself,” she said, her voice smooth but firm. “If they are failing, we may not have much time.”

Finally, Captain Alric Stonehelm, the commander of Gandor’s City Guard, stepped forward, arms crossed. A scar ran down his cheek, and his expression was one of pragmatic readiness.

“You’ve brought me wizards and priests, but what you *really* need,” he said, “are swords.”

Rogrim grinned. “Then it’s a good thing we’ve got all three.”

With a full party assembled, they made their way back to the collapsed watchtower, where the hidden tunnels lay waiting.

Torches burned bright as they descended once more into the forgotten depths. The air was colder now, the unnatural chill of the ruin settling into their bones.

As they reached the sealed gate, Rogrim’s stomach tightened.

The runes were no longer flickering.

They were dead.

High Cleric Durnheim stepped forward, running a hand along the ancient dwarven script. “Moradin’s name… these runes were made by master runepriests. And now… they are gone.”

Archmage Elyndra narrowed her eyes, raising a hand. A small pulse of arcane energy swept over the gate. She flinched. “The seal didn’t just *fail*—it was unmade.”

Pigrim groaned. “I was *really* hoping you wouldn’t say that.”

Rogrim set his jaw. “No point in delaying.”

He pushed against the iron gate.

It swung open with an unnatural ease.

The path beyond lay open, a deep, winding tunnel leading into pure darkness.

Something had been waiting.

And now…

It knew they were coming.

The iron gate groaned as it swung inward, revealing a black abyss beyond. A heavy gust of air rolled out from the tunnel, thick with the scent of old dust, damp stone, and something else—something wrong.

Rogrim tightened his grip on his mace, his instincts screaming that they had crossed a threshold that should never have been opened.

Behind him, High Cleric Durnheim traced a hand over the dead runes on the doorway, his brow furrowed. “This place was sealed for a reason. What lies ahead is not of Moradin’s making.”

Pigrim shuddered. “Oh, good. So it’s not just ancient dwarven horrors, it’s some *other* kind of nightmare. Just what I wanted.”

Archmage Elyndra murmured an incantation, and a series of blue orbs flickered to life, floating ahead to illuminate the passage. The light barely pushed back the gloom.

Captain Alric Stonehelm drew his sword. “No more stalling. We go in, we find out what’s down there, and if it’s a threat—we put it down.”

Rogrim nodded. “Aye. Let’s move.”

And so, they stepped into the abyss.

The passage led downward for what felt like an eternity, spiraling deep below Gandor’s foundation. The walls were no longer dwarven stonework—they were older, rougher, as though carved by something that did not use tools.

The further they went, the heavier the air became. The stillness was unnatural, as if the very earth was waiting, listening.

Then, the tunnel opened into a vast cavern.

Their torches and mage-lights flickered, revealing something impossible—an entire city, buried beneath the world.

It sprawled beneath the cavernous ceiling, its buildings worn and broken, covered in strange black vines that pulsed with dim green veins of light. Towering pillars, once grand, now stood half-collapsed, and the streets were littered with bones—some dwarven, some… not.

Pigrim stared, wide-eyed. “By the gods… what is this place?”

Durnheim’s voice was grim. “This is no dwarven ruin. This is something… older.”

Elyndra’s fingers twitched as she reached toward the air, her voice barely above a whisper. “There is magic here—old, corrupted. It’s been festering for *centuries*.”

Rogrim studied the city, feeling a deep unease settle in his gut. “Whatever this place was… something wiped it out. And it wasn’t time.”

Then, the whispering returned.

It slithered through the cavern, not from one place, but from everywhere.

"You have come… too late…"

A pulse of sickly green light rippled through the city.

And the bones in the streets began to move.

Rogrim snapped his shield up just as the first skeleton lunged. It was not a simple, mindless undead—the bones shifted and twisted, reforming in ways that should not have been possible.

A dwarven skull, but with elongated arms, too many ribs, and claws made of fused bone.

It shrieked as it attacked.

Rogrim bashed it backward with his shield and crushed its twisted skull with his mace.

All around them, the dead stirred. Skeletons rose from the streets, their broken forms snapping together, some half-merged with the black vines.

Pigrim swore. “Oh, come on! *Bone monsters?!*”

Captain Stonehelm bellowed, “Form up! Hold the line!”

The battle erupted.

Durnheim slammed his warhammer down, unleashing a golden shockwave that sent bones flying.

Elyndra raised a barrier of blue fire, incinerating several creatures that charged too close.

Pigrim darted between the undead, stabbing and severing bone tendons, rolling beneath a sweeping claw before slashing its spine apart.

Rogrim fought like a force of nature, his mace and shield shattering everything that came near. He did not retreat. He did not falter.

But for every creature that fell, more rose.

And the whispering voice only grew stronger.

"The gate is open… the way is clear… the Sleeper awakens…"

Then—the ground shook.

The very stone beneath their feet trembled, and from the center of the lost city, a monolithic structure began to rise.

A black tower, hidden beneath the rubble, shook free, its surface covered in glowing green runes—the same as the ones that had once sealed the door above.

Elyndra gasped. “The real prison… it’s *here*.”

The whispering turned into a deafening roar.

"You… are too late."

From the top of the tower, a crack split open.

And something inside opened its eyes.

Rogrim exhaled, bracing himself. “We end this.”

Durnheim raised his hammer. “For Moradin.”

Elyndra’s hands flared with arcane power. “For the city.”

Stonehelm drew his blade. “For the living.”

Pigrim groaned. “For my *continued survival*.”

The tower pulsed, the thing inside stirring.

Rogrim tightened his grip on his mace.

The battle for Gandor’s soul had just begun.

A low, *thundering* sound rippled through the underground city as the black tower continued to rise, shaking loose ancient rubble. The glowing runes along its surface pulsed like a heartbeat, casting eerie green light across the cavern.

Then, the top of the tower split open.

A swirling vortex of darkness and energy erupted from within, spiraling into the cavern like a storm of writhing shadows. And at its center, something moved—a vast, *shifting mass* barely visible through the black mist.

The whispering voice was no longer a whisper. It was a roar.

"The Sleeper wakes… the chains are broken… and your world will drown in shadow."

Rogrim gritted his teeth. “Aye? Let’s see about that.”

The undead horrors that had been clawing their way from the ruins twisted, their bones reshaping, dark energy surging through them. Some grew extra limbs, others merged together, forming monstrous warped abominations.

Then, they charged.

Captain Stonehelm bellowed, “Hold the line!”

The city guards formed ranks, shields locking together, spears aimed forward as the wave of horrors crashed into them.

Durnheim roared a prayer to Moradin, his warhammer flaring with golden light as he smashed apart a towering, multi-limbed abomination.

Elyndra raised her hands, unleashing a blue firestorm that incinerated dozens of skeletons before they could reach the line.

Pigrim ducked under a sweeping claw, rolling behind a foe before sinking his sword into its exposed spine. “There are *too many* of these things!”

Rogrim planted his feet as three monstrosities lunged at him. He bashed one aside with his shield, crushed another’s skull with his mace, and caught the third by the throat, using its own momentum to hurl it into a broken pillar.

But for every one that fell, more rose.

A deep rumble came from the tower.

And then… it stepped out.

A colossal figure, wrapped in shifting shadow, its form half-real, half-nightmare. Its head was featureless save for two massive green eyes, burning like lanterns in the dark. Chains still clung to its arms and legs, ancient bindings that now dragged uselessly behind it.

The creature’s voice was a *low, reverberating growl*, filled with power and malice.

"You were warned."

Then, it raised a clawed hand, and the entire cavern trembled.

The dead screamed, surging forward in renewed frenzy. The earth cracked, pillars collapsed, and a wave of black energy rushed toward them.

Rogrim threw up his shield just in time to absorb the blast. He slid back, his boots grinding against the stone, but he did not fall.

Durnheim, voice booming, raised his warhammer. Golden chains of light erupted from the ground, latching onto the monstrous figure. “We must bind it! Keep it contained!”

Elyndra's hands blazed with runes, her voice sharp as she began an incantation. "If we don't stop it *now*, it will never be sealed again!"

Pigrim wiped blood from his brow. "*Fantastic!* So how exactly do we kill something made of pure nightmare?"

Rogrim rolled his shoulders, gripping his mace tighter.

"We hit it until it stays down."

And with that, they charged.

esh and shadow. Its green-burning eyes locked onto the invading warriors, filled with something both ancient and hungry.

Rogrim felt the sheer wrongness of the creature deep in his bones—this thing had been sealed away for a reason.

And now, it was free.

The dead surged forward, throwing themselves at the city guards, howling with mindless fury. Captain Stonehelm roared orders as his men held the line, shields clashing with bone and claw. Durnheim raised his warhammer, chanting a powerful prayer of Moradin, and golden chains of light wrapped around the Sleeper's limbs, trying to bind it once more.

But the creature only laughed.

"You think I can be chained again? Foolish mortal."

With a twist of its massive arm, the chains shattered—sending a shockwave of dark energy that blasted Durnheim backward, slamming him into a broken pillar.

Pigrim cursed. "Oh, *that's* bad."

Elyndra's hands glowed bright with runes, her voice sharp with focus. "We can't just *seal it again*! We have to weaken it first!"

Rogrim grinned fiercely, his mace gleaming in the eerie light. "Then we take it apart—*piece by piece!*"

The beast moved first—raising one clawed hand, it swiped at the warriors with a mass of shadow-tendrils, too fast, too wide to dodge completely.

Rogrim threw up his shield, the impact sending him skidding backward.

Pigrim rolled to the side, narrowly avoiding being crushed, before leaping up and slashing one of the Sleeper's tendrils with his sword.

To his horror, the wound immediately closed.

Pigrim cursed. “It heals too fast!”

Elyndra thrust out a hand, and a bolt of blue fire struck the creature’s chest. This time, the fire lingered, burning against its form.

She grinned triumphantly. “Fire and holy magic! It can’t regenerate through them!”

Rogrim turned to Durnheim, who was already picking himself up. “Cleric! Can you still fight?”

Durnheim spat blood onto the ground. “Aye. And Moradin fights with me.”

The dwarf slammed his warhammer to the ground, sending a wave of holy light across the battlefield. The undead shrieked as the power burned through them, turning them to dust.

Pigrim grinned. “Well, that’s *one* problem handled.”

The Sleeper howled in rage and turned its full attention to Rogrim.

"I will unmake you, little warrior."

The beast lunged, its shadowy claws aiming straight for Rogrim’s chest.

Instead of dodging, Rogrim charged forward.

The creature did not expect this.

Rogrim slammed his shield into the Sleeper’s arm, using his full weight to deflect the blow, then twisted his body and swung his mace directly into the creature’s knee.

A loud crack rang through the cavern as the Sleeper stumbled.

For the first time, it felt pain.

"You… dare?!"

Rogrim grinned. “Aye. And there’s more where that came from.”

Elyndra hurriedly chanted, tracing glowing runes in the air. “If we can weaken it enough, I can bind it—permanently.”

Durnheim gritted his teeth, gripping his warhammer. “Then we pour everything we have into it.”

Stonehelm and his men rallied, hacking away at the remaining undead while keeping the Sleeper distracted.

Rogrim took a deep breath.

This was it.

A fight for the fate of Gandor itself.

He tightened his grip on his mace.

And charged.

Rogrim's boots thundered against the ancient stone as he charged the Sleeper, his mace glowing with righteous fury. The colossal creature swung its clawed arm, shadow and malice swirling around it, but Rogrim was ready.

He ducked under the strike, rolling to the side just in time to avoid being crushed.

Pigrim was right behind him, darting between rubble and fallen bodies. "Rogrim, I hope you've got a *real* plan beyond just 'hit it until it dies'!"

Rogrim grinned. "Aye. I do."

He leapt onto a fallen pillar, using the momentum to launch himself toward the Sleeper's chest.

With a roaring battle cry, he slammed his mace into the beast's core.

The Sleeper shrieked, its body cracking where the mace struck—green fire spilling from the wound.

Durnheim, his voice filled with divine power, raised his warhammer high. "NOW!"

He brought it down, and a pillar of golden light erupted, burning through the creature's shadow-flesh.

The Sleeper staggered back, its howl shaking the cavern.

"No! You cannot... I was promised release!"

Elyndra stepped forward, her eyes glowing with raw power. "Then you were lied to."

She raised both hands, and runes blazed to life around her, forming a circle of binding.

Pigrim's eyes widened. "Is that supposed to happen?"

Rogrim smiled. "I think she's about to shut this thing down."

The binding runes shot forward, wrapping around the Sleeper, pulling its massive form back toward the black tower.

It screamed, clawing at the ground, but the magic held firm.

"I CANNOT BE CHAINED AGAIN—"

Rogrim gritted his teeth. "Oh, aye. You can."

He charged one last time, raising his mace high.

With a mighty swing, he smashed the Sleeper's skull-like head, cracking it open.

A shockwave of light and shadow exploded outward.

The Sleeper let out one final, deafening wail—

—before it was dragged back into the tower.

The doors slammed shut.

The runic seals reignited.

The cavern shook as the prison sealed itself once more.

Then—silence.

The green veins of energy that had pulsed through the ruins dimmed, fading into darkness. The undead collapsed, their bodies turning to dust.

Rogrim, breathing heavily, planted his shield in the ground. "Is… it over?"

Elyndra nodded, though she looked exhausted. "For now. The seal is restored. This place… will sleep again."

Durnheim exhaled, gripping his warhammer. "Moradin's blessing, we live."

Pigrim, slumping onto a rock, groaned. "*Barely.*"

Captain Stonehelm surveyed the battlefield, shaking his head. "We lost too many good men today… but we saved the city."

Rogrim wiped sweat from his brow. "Aye. And we made damn sure that thing stays buried."

Pigrim muttered, "I swear, if I ever hear whispering in the dark again, I'm retiring."

Elyndra smiled. "You *said* that last time."

When the party finally emerged from the ruins, the first rays of morning light were breaking over Gandor's walls.

They had won.

The city still stood.

The horror below remained sealed.

And for once, there was peace.

Rogrim, wiping the dust from his armor, turned to Pigrim. “You know, lad, I think we earned ourselves a drink.”

Pigrim sighed. “You know what? Aye. Let’s do something *normal* for once.”

And with that, they headed for the Misty Mug.

Because while the world would always have new evils to fight…

…for now, a mug of ale was the only battle that mattered.

The Misty Mug was alive with the warmth of lamplight and laughter, the scent of roasted meat and pipe smoke thick in the air. The wooden beams of the ceiling were dark with age, and the heavy oaken tables bore the scars of a thousand tankards slammed down in revelry. The air buzzed with the murmur of conversation, the occasional burst of laughter, and the rhythmic plucking of a bard’s lute from the corner.

Near the great stone hearth, where a fire burned low and steady, Rogrim sat like a king on his throne. A tankard of dark ale rested in his massive fist, and his pipe smoldered with Blackweed, releasing blackish-gray tendrils of smoke that curled lazily around his thick beard.

Pigrim sat across from him, his head resting against the table, half-awake after their harrowing battle in the depths. His own ale sat mostly untouched.

Rogrim exhaled a great plume of smoke, tapping his pipe against the table. “And that, lad, is how a true paladin smites the forces of darkness.”

Pigrim groaned. “We had a whole *army* of warriors, a high cleric, a wizard, and the entire city guard fighting that thing, Rogrim.”

Rogrim waved a hand dismissively. “Aye, aye, *small details.* But who was at the very front, hurling himself into the maw of evil, wielding the righteous fury of the gods?”

Pigrim sighed. “You?”

Rogrim grinned, taking a deep gulp of ale. “Aye, me. And what did you witness, lad? You saw the power of paladinship at work. A holy warrior, clad in faith and fury, battling the shadow itself! Did I falter?”

“You got thrown across the cavern twice.”

“Did I yield?”

“You faceplanted into a pile of skeletons.”

“Did I stand up again?”

Pigrim groaned. “Unfortunately.”

Rogrim puffed his pipe, exhaling more smoke. “You lack faith, lad. A paladin must be unyielding—a beacon of virtue and strength.” He slammed a fist against the table, making nearby drinkers glance their way. “We are the shield against darkness, the hammer of righteousness!”

Pigrim muttered into his ale. “Still *not* a paladin.”

Rogrim ignored him and raised his tankard high. His voice boomed through the tavern, drawing the attention of the room.

“Lord of the whole Lords, mighty Moradin, guardian of warriors and keepers of the forge! Grant us strength to crush the wicked, to stand unyielding before the storms of battle! May our shields never break, may our arms never falter, and may the fires of justice burn eternal!”

A few drunken patrons cheered, raising their own tankards, even if they had no idea what Rogrim was on about.

The barkeep, polishing a mug, smiled. “You planning to start a holy order in my tavern, Rogrim?”

Rogrim leaned back, smoke curling around his face. “Aye, perhaps. But first—I shall have another ale.”

Pigrim shook his head, watching as the dwarf drank deep, basking in his victory.

Somewhere, in the depths of Gandor, the darkness still stirred.

The streets of Gandor bustled with life as Rogrim and Pigrim wandered the city, the morning sun casting a golden glow over the stone walls and busy market stalls. Rogrim, feeling particularly self-important after their recent victory, walked with his chest puffed out, his mace slung over his shoulder, and his cape billowing dramatically—or at least, that’s how he imagined it.

Pigrim, meanwhile, trailed behind, chewing on an apple he had *definitely not paid for*, looking thoroughly unimpressed.

The Temple

They soon found themselves before the Grand Temple of Moradin, its tall, silver-inlaid doors gleaming in the sunlight. The temple’s stone pillars were carved with the stories of legendary dwarven heroes, and at its entrance stood a massive anvil-shaped brazier, its flames burning ever-bright in Moradin’s honor.

Rogrim sighed deeply, taking in the sight as though it were the most sacred thing he had ever seen.

“A temple, lad,” he murmured, gripping Pigrim’s shoulder. “A place of holy warriors. Paladins, defenders of the faith—my kin.”

Pigrim raised an eyebrow. “You mean *actual* paladins. Not just, y’know, you.”

Rogrim ignored him and strode forward.

The interior of the temple was grand but solemn—rows of iron-wrought braziers burned low, filling the air with the scent of smoldering incense and ancient stone. Dwarven priests and clerics moved quietly between the pews, tending to their prayers.

At the center of the temple stood a great forge-altar, where a high priest of Moradin, clad in silver robes, oversaw the tending of sacred flames. His beard was long and braided, his expression stern yet wise. He turned as Rogrim approached, his keen eyes studying the dwarf with interest.

Rogrim pounded a fist to his chest in salute. “High Priest! I am Rogrim, champion of justice, hammer of righteousness, a beacon of paladin virtue—”

Pigrim coughed. “*Not actually a paladin.*”

Rogrim shot him a glare before continuing. “—a warrior devoted to the cause of righteous battle! The wicked fall before me, the innocent stand safe in my shadow! I have smote the cursed, battled the unholy, and wield my mace in Moradin’s name!”

The high priest raised an eyebrow, but there was a hint of amusement behind his stoic expression. “Such devotion,” he said, his voice deep and measured. “Tell me, warrior, do you know the Oath of the Forgebound?”

Rogrim cleared his throat, straightened his stance, and proudly recited:

"By the Hammer and the Anvil,
By the Flame that tempers steel,
I stand against the creeping dark,
A shield for those who kneel.
No coin shall sway, no fear shall break,
My oath is forged in fire,
For Moradin’s will I march to war,
And justice shall not tire!"

A few nearby priests murmured in approval, nodding at the ancient words.

The high priest smiled slightly. “You know the words well. And yet…” His expression darkened slightly. “*Words alone do not forge a paladin.*”

Rogrim puffed out his chest. “Aye, but *deeds* do! And I am a doer of righteous deeds, priest. Why, just last week, I singlehandedly led a force to vanquish an ancient evil, battling undead horrors, holding the line against a great shadowy beast, all while guiding lesser men—”

Pigrim snorted. “Lesser *men*? You got *thrown* across a cavern, remember?”

Rogrim ignored him again.

The high priest's gaze turned thoughtful. "Perhaps… there is *truth* to your words. You have the spirit of a paladin, even if you do not bear the divine mantle."

Rogrim beamed. "Exactly! And so, I must be—"

The priest raised a hand. "Not yet."

Rogrim paused mid-triumphant pose. "Oh."

The high priest turned toward the flames of the forge-altar, his voice taking on a more solemn tone.

"There was once an order of paladins, devoted to Moradin's justice. The Order of the Silver Anvil—righteous defenders of dwarvenkind. Their stronghold, Hammerhold Keep, stood as a bastion of light… until, centuries ago, it was lost."

Rogrim's brow furrowed. "Lost? How do you *lose* a keep?"

The priest's gaze darkened. "No one knows for certain. Its warriors vanished, its halls abandoned—but now… whispers tell of strange lights flickering in the ruins, of spectral knights wandering the halls, lamenting their failure to uphold their sacred charge."

Pigrim shifted uncomfortably. "Oh, great. *More ghosts.*"

The high priest turned back to Rogrim. "You claim to be a true warrior of righteousness. If you wish to prove it—not just in words, but in deeds—then I task you with this: Journey to Hammerhold Keep. Discover what happened to the lost paladins. Restore their sacred legacy."

Rogrim grinned. "A noble quest! A trial worthy of a paladin! Aye, priest, I shall go forth and —"

The priest raised a finger. "Know this, warrior. If you do this, you are not simply testing your might. You are testing your soul. If you are truly worthy… then perhaps, you shall take your place among the paladins of old."

The room fell silent.

For the first time, Rogrim hesitated.

Pigrim narrowed his eyes, studying his friend. He knew Rogrim loved the *idea* of being a paladin, but this? This was real.

Rogrim finally nodded, his voice quieter—but firm. "Aye. I will take this trial."

The high priest placed a hand on his shoulder. "Then go, warrior. Face the Trial of the Forgotten Oath. And may Moradin guide your path."

As they left the temple, Pigrim whistled. “So, uh… this is serious, huh?”

Rogrim nodded slowly. “Aye.” He exhaled, then straightened. “But have no fear, lad! I shall march forth, uncover the mystery, and take my rightful place among Moradin’s chosen!”

Pigrim smiled. “Or, y’know, we’ll find out the ghosts *really don’t want visitors*, and we’ll have to run for our lives.”

Rogrim grinned. “*Either way,* it shall be glorious.”

The road to Hammerhold Keep was long and treacherous. Rogrim and Pigrim left the stone-paved streets of Gandor behind, trading the comfort of city walls for the rugged wilderness of the Cragspire Mountains.

The land was harsh—jagged peaks loomed overhead, their snow-capped tops reaching into the heavens like the frozen hands of giants. The wind howled through the passes, carrying the scent of pine and cold stone.

Rogrim trudged forward, determined, his mace strapped to his back and his shield slung over his arm. He walked with purpose, as though Moradin himself had forged this path just for him.

Pigrim, meanwhile, shivered under his cloak, grumbling as he kicked a loose rock down the trail. “You *know*, most warriors would just take a bag of gold and be happy. But nooo, *you* had to go chasing after ghosts and cursed relics.”

Rogrim grinned, his beard dusty with the mountain air. “Lad, this is a *paladin’s* work! To walk the path of honor, to restore that which is lost.”

The journey was uneventful—at first. But as the sun began to dip behind the mountain ridges, the landscape changed.

The trees grew twisted. The air became heavier. A strange stillness settled over the land, and an unnatural mist curled along the path.

Then, they saw it.

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Pigrim held up a hand. “You’re *not* a paladin.”

Rogrim ignored him.

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The trees grew twisted. The air became heavier. A strange stillness settled over the land, and an unnatural mist curled along the path.

Then, they saw it.

The ruins of Hammerhold Keep stood against the mountainside, its massive stone walls crumbling under the weight of centuries. The once-great banners of the Silver Anvil now hung tattered and faded, barely recognizable.

And at the gate, spectral figures stood in eerie silence.

Ghostly knights, their forms flickering in the dim light, their armor still gleaming with spectral steel. Their faces were grim, their eyes hollow.

Pigrim whispered. “I *really* hate ghosts.”

Rogrim took a deep breath, then stepped forward.

One of the knights, his armor engraved with the sigil of the Silver Anvil, raised his spectral sword.

His voice was hollow, yet filled with sorrow.

"Who comes before the fallen?"

Rogrim stood tall. “I am Rogrim, warrior of justice, sworn in heart to Moradin’s cause! I come to restore what was lost.”

The knight’s eyes glowed with ghostly light.

"Then you must face the Trial of the Forgotten Oath."

The wind howled through the ruins.

And the ghosts closed in.

The spectral paladins did not attack—not yet. Instead, they encircled Rogrim, their presence pressing down upon him like an invisible weight.

One knight, his voice like the rustling of dry leaves, spoke first.

"Will you show mercy, even to those unworthy?"

A vision flashed before Rogrim's eyes—a fallen enemy, wounded, helpless. A vengeful choice lay before him.

Another knight spoke.

"Will you resist temptation, even when offered power?"

A second vision—a golden weapon, glowing with divine energy, left unguarded. A chance to take strength not earned.

The final knight stepped forward.

"Will you uphold justice, even at great cost?"

The last vision—a friend, guilty of a grievous crime, begging for forgiveness. A choice between loyalty and righteousness.

The air grew heavier.

The choices were not tests of strength, but of character.

And Rogrim had to answer.

He set his jaw. "I *am* justice. I *am* honor. I will show mercy to those who seek redemption. I will refuse power unearned. And I will uphold justice… even if it costs me dearly."

For a long moment, the ghosts were silent.

Then, the first knight lowered his sword.

"Then you may enter."

The mist parted.

And Hammerhold Keep awaited.

The fortress was a tomb.

Rogrim and Pigrim walked through dust-covered halls, where ghostly whispers echoed in the still air. The remnants of great feasting tables lay in ruin, long-crumbled banners hung in tattered shreds, and old weapons lay rusted in the corners.

Yet the deeper they went, the more they could feel it.

A great sorrow hung over the place. The knights had not simply died—they had failed.

Pigrim shuddered. “This place feels *wrong*.”

Rogrim nodded. “Aye. There’s still unfinished business here.”

Then, from the darkness, a voice.

"You have come… at last."

A new ghost appeared, but unlike the others, his form was clearer.

He wore the full armor of a Silver Anvil paladin, his spectral warhammer still clutched in his grip.

His eyes locked onto Rogrim.

"You seek the Oathbound Warhammer. You seek to restore our honor."

Rogrim gripped his mace. “Aye.”

The ghost’s expression darkened.

"Then you must face the betrayer."

Pigrim sighed. “Oh, *of course* there’s a betrayer.”

The knight’s voice grew solemn.

"The one who doomed us still lingers below. He stole our sacred relic… and fled into the Chasm of Shadows. He has become something… else. If you wish to complete the Trial, you must face him. And if you survive… you must make the Paladin’s Vow."

Rogrim gritted his teeth.

“Then take us to the Chasm.”

The ghost turned, leading them deeper into the keep.

And below, the final test awaited.

The halls of Hammerhold Keep trembled as Rogrim and Pigrim followed the spectral knight deeper into the ruin. The air grew colder, and the walls seemed to press in, the once-great stronghold turning into a tomb with every step.

The knight’s ghostly form flickered, his voice heavy with sorrow.

"The traitor fled below, into the Chasm of Shadows. There, he bound himself to the darkness, forsaking his oath."

Pigrim muttered, “See, *this* is why I don’t trust oaths. They always end with curses and chasm-dwelling lunatics.”

Rogrim ignored him. “Why did he betray the Order?”

The knight paused at the entrance to a great stairwell, a spiraling descent into absolute darkness.

"Fear," the ghost admitted. *"He feared that we would fall. That the relic would be taken. So he sought power beyond Moradin’s light—and in doing so, he doomed us all."*

The knight turned, his eyes burning.

"You must do what we could not. You must defeat him… and reclaim the Oathbound Warhammer."

Then, the spirit faded into the shadows, leaving them alone before the stairwell.

Pigrim sighed. “Right. So. *One last cursed warrior stands in our way.* What’s the plan?”

Rogrim cracked his knuckles. “We go down there, and we settle this the dwarven way.”

Pigrim smiled. “So, ‘hit it with a hammer until it stops moving?’”

Rogrim grinned. “Aye.”

And with that, they descended into the Chasm of Shadows.

The stairwell led into a massive cavern, cold and silent, where the ruins of an ancient dwarven hall stood forgotten. Statues of warriors loomed in the darkness, their faces worn and cracked by time.

At the heart of the cavern, a single figure stood upon a raised stone dais.

A dwarf, clad in ancient armor, his once-proud sigil of the Silver Anvil now twisted, corrupted by dark runes etched into the metal. His eyes burned with unnatural green fire, and in his gauntleted hands, he held the Oathbound Warhammer—its once-holy glow now shrouded in shadow.

"You come seeking justice," the Death Knight rasped, his voice like grinding stone. *"But you do not know the truth."*

Rogrim stepped forward, raising his shield. “I know enough. You took the relic, you broke your oath, and you doomed your brothers.”

The Death Knight’s gauntlets tightened around the warhammer’s grip.

"I did what I must to protect them. You call it betrayal—I call it sacrifice."

Pigrim scoffed. “Oh, *great*, he’s one of *those* villains. Next, he’ll say—”

"And now… you must fall."

Pigrim threw up his hands. “Called it.”

The Death Knight raised the Oathbound Warhammer, and black lightning surged across its surface.

Then, with a deafening roar, he charged.

The Death Knight swung first—a blow that shattered stone, forcing Rogrim to dodge sideways as the impact sent cracks racing through the floor.

Pigrim rolled away, narrowly avoiding a second swing. “Okay, he *hits* like a mountain falling on you!”

Rogrim grinned, raising his shield. “Then we’ll just have to hit harder!”

He lunged, bringing his mace down in a crushing arc—only for the Death Knight to parry it effortlessly.

With inhuman speed, the Death Knight spun, slamming a boot into Rogrim's chest and sending him crashing into a pillar.

Pigrim cursed. "Well, that's *unfair*—"

The Death Knight turned on him instantly, striking with a wave of dark energy.

Pigrim barely ducked, darting behind a fallen statue. "Oh, *great*! He's got magic, too?!"

Rogrim hauled himself up, spitting dust. "Lad—*he's undead*. He's *supposed* to have magic."

The Death Knight stalked forward, his voice echoing through the chamber.

"You are not worthy of this relic. You are not one of us."

Rogrim growled, slamming his shield down.

"Oh, aye? Then let's see who's worthy!"

With a battle cry, he charged again.

This time, when the Death Knight swung, Rogrim didn't dodge. He caught the blow on his shield—the force denting the metal but holding strong.

Then, with all his might, he rammed his shoulder forward, knocking the Death Knight off balance.

Pigrim saw the opening. "Oh, *finally*—"

The halfling darted behind the undead warrior, slicing at the weak points in his armor. The blade bit deep, and the Death Knight stumbled.

Rogrim saw his chance.

With a ferocious roar, he raised his mace and brought it down on the Death Knight's helm.

The impact cracked the skull beneath, and the Death Knight fell to his knees.

The green fire in his eyes dimmed.

"You… are strong."

Rogrim panted. "Aye."

The Death Knight looked at the Oathbound Warhammer, his gauntlet trembling.

"Perhaps… I was wrong."

With a final shuddering breath, he released the relic—the darkness around it vanishing as the hammer's true light was restored.

The Death Knight's body crumbled into dust, leaving behind only rusted armor and silence.

The cavern grew quiet as Rogrim lifted the warhammer, feeling its weight, its history.

Then, a great light filled the chamber.

The spirits of the Silver Anvil appeared once more, their forms standing tall.

The High Paladin of the order stepped forward.

"Rogrim of Gandor," he intoned, *"you have proven your strength in battle. But will you prove your strength in spirit?"*

Rogrim met his gaze. "What must I do?"

The spirit's voice was solemn.

"Swear the Oath of the Silver Anvil. Bind yourself to the ideals of justice, honor, and sacrifice. Devote yourself—not just to battle, but to righteousness."

A pause.

Pigrim watched carefully.

For years, Rogrim had called himself a paladin, had *claimed* the title.

But now, he stood at the threshold of actually becoming one.

Rogrim gripped the Oathbound Warhammer tight.

Then, he knelt.

And with a steady voice, he swore the oath.

"By the Hammer and the Anvil,
By the Flame that tempers steel,
I stand against the creeping dark,
A shield for those who kneel.
No coin shall sway, no fear shall break,
My oath is forged in fire,
For Moradin's will I march to war,
And justice shall not tire!"

The spirits bowed their heads.

The light faded.

And when Rogrim rose, he held the warhammer of the Silver Anvil.

The silence in the Chasm of Shadows was deafening. The spirits of the Silver Anvil had faded, leaving behind only the dim glow of the newly purified Oathbound Warhammer. Its silver head gleamed, runes of Moradin's blessing etched deep into the steel, pulsing with faint, golden light.

Rogrim stared at it, turning it in his hands. The weight was perfect—not just in metal, but in meaning.

Pigrim, arms crossed, smiled. "Well. Look at you. Got your fancy holy hammer, got a ghost-approved title. How's it feel to *finally* be a real paladin?"

Rogrim let out a long exhale, gripping the hammer tight. "Aye… it feels *right*."

Then he grinned. "Though, truth be told, I've always *been* a paladin, lad. This just makes it official."

Pigrim sighed. "Of course it does."

The two made their way back up, through the ruined halls of Hammerhold Keep. The oppressive weight of the curse was gone—where once the air had been thick with sorrow, it was now still, but peaceful.

The remaining ghostly knights stood at attention as they passed, watching in solemn silence. At the threshold of the keep, the High Paladin's spirit reappeared one last time.

"You have done what we could not. The Oath is restored. Our Watch is ended."

The ghost gave Rogrim a final nod, then, like a dying ember, faded into the wind.

Pigrim nudged Rogrim. "Well, congratulations. You just retired a bunch of ghosts. Hope you don't expect me to start calling you 'Ser Holybeard' or something."

Rogrim snorted. "Just *Ser Beard* will do."

The dwarf and the halfling stepped out into the morning light.

The journey back to Gandor was quicker than the first—the mountains no longer felt so foreboding, the road felt lighter, as if the land itself had breathed a sigh of relief.

When they arrived at the Temple of Moradin, the High Priest was waiting.

His eyes fell upon the Oathbound Warhammer, and he nodded approvingly.

"You have done more than reclaim a relic," the priest said. "You have proven your worth. You have truly embraced the path of the paladin."

Pigrim leaned over to Rogrim. "He's feeding your *delusion*, you know."

Rogrim beamed, puffing his chest. “Aye, and it’s glorious.”

The priests gathered, a formal blessing was given, and for the first time in his life, Rogrim stood among paladins— as one of them.

That night, back at The Misty Mug, Rogrim and Pigrim sat in their usual spot.

Rogrim puffed on his pipe, swirling blackweed smoke around his head, sipping his dark ale. He stretched out, feeling satisfied, at peace.

Pigrim leaned back in his chair. “So, tell me, what now? Going to build a holy fortress? Start a crusade?”

Rogrim chuckled. “Nay, lad. There’s always another evil to smite, another villain to humble.” He leaned forward, grinning. “And if I know anything… the world won’t stay quiet for long.”

Pigrim groaned. “I was *afraid* you’d say that.”

The great stone halls of Moradin’s temple loomed high above Rogrim as he knelt before the High Priest, the sacred Oathbound Warhammer resting before him. The room was quiet, save for the flickering braziers casting shadows along the carved walls. The weight of his newfound title sat heavy on his shoulders.

The High Priest studied him with calm, unwavering eyes. “You have passed your first trial, Rogrim. You wear the mantle of paladin now.”

Rogrim grinned. “Aye! And rightly so! You’ve seen my deeds, priest—I’ve cleansed the curse of Hammerhold, bested a Death Knight, and restored the Oathbound Warhammer! Surely, my path is clear—I shall bring righteous fury to the wicked and shine the light of Moradin across the land!”

The High Priest raised a hand. “And yet… a single battle does not forge an unbreakable blade.”

Rogrim’s grin faded slightly.

The High Priest stepped forward, voice firm. “Paladins are not judged by a single victory. You have *earned* your place, but you have yet to *prove* your honor.”

Pigrim, standing off to the side, smiled. “Oh, *this* I like.”

Rogrim shot him a glare before turning back to the priest. “Then name the task, and I shall complete it!”

The High Priest nodded, then spoke solemnly.

“Long ago, a knight of the Silver Anvil named Sir Durn Steelvein broke his sacred oath. He abandoned his post, turned from Moradin’s light, and forsook the code he swore to uphold.”

Rogrim frowned. “And what became of him?”

The priest's expression darkened. "He wanders still. A broken warrior, living in the Haunted Caverns of Thal'Karash, a place where vengeful spirits linger and whisper poison to the lost. He has abandoned his faith, his order, and his very honor."

Pigrim crossed his arms. "Let me guess. We have to *go find him*?"

The High Priest nodded. "Yes. And you must bring him back to the light." He fixed Rogrim with a piercing gaze. "This is your true test of honor. Not in battle alone—but in spirit."

Rogrim's hand clenched into a fist. "And if he refuses?"

The priest's voice was grim. "Then you must deliver justice. If he will not reclaim his honor, then he must fall by your hand. The Silver Anvil's legacy cannot suffer the shame of an unpunished oathbreaker."

Pigrim let out a slow breath. "Right. So, we're either redeeming a fallen paladin… or executing him."

The High Priest nodded. "The choice is yours, Rogrim. But whatever you do, you must prove yourself worthy of the title you claim."

Rogrim's fist tightened.

For once, he did not boast. He did not grin.

He simply bowed his head. "Aye. I'll see it done."

The quest had begun.

The road to Thal'Karash led far beyond Gandor's borders, past craggy wastelands and through forests where the trees grew twisted and blackened. Even the air felt heavy—a place untouched by Moradin's light.

Rogrim and Pigrim stood at the cavern's entrance, a yawning abyss carved into the mountainside. Cold mist curled along the ground, and distant whispers echoed from deep within.

Pigrim shivered, gripping his cloak. "Okay. So. Evil cave. Full of ghosts. Possibly a *very angry ex-paladin* at the bottom. Fantastic."

Rogrim adjusted his grip on the Oathbound Warhammer. "Aye. And we're going in."

Pigrim sighed. "I *knew* you'd say that."

With a final breath, they stepped into the darkness.

And the voices began.

The deeper they ventured, the more the cavern seemed alive—not with beasts, but with whispers. Faint, hollow voices, slipping into their ears, filling the air with doubt and despair.

"He is already lost…"

"Oaths are chains… they do not free, they bind."

"You walk to your own failure, dwarf."

Rogrim gritted his teeth, trying to push past the voices.

Pigrim looked shaken. “They’re *in my head*, Rogrim.”

Rogrim clasped his shoulder, steady. “They are lies, lad. Nothing more.”

Then, a deeper voice, clearer than the rest.

"And yet… you are here."

A figure stepped from the shadows.

Sir Durn Steelvein.

He was not a ghost—he was very much alive. But his armor was worn, his cloak tattered, his face weathered with years of hardship.

He carried a greatsword, resting lightly on one shoulder, his eyes burning with something dangerous.

He stared at Rogrim, then smiled. “Well now. A *new* paladin? Come to preach? To judge?”

Rogrim stepped forward, planting his feet. “I come to set things right, Steelvein.”

Durn scoffed. “You’ve come to fix what isn’t broken.”

Pigrim muttered. “Oh, *here we go*…”

Durn’s eyes hardened. “The Silver Anvil was doomed before I ever turned my back on it. I *saw* it coming. I *knew* our oaths would lead us to ruin.” He stepped forward. “And so, I left. I chose to live.”

Rogrim growled. “You chose dishonor.”

Durn chuckled bitterly. “And who are you to judge me, boy? You think because you swing a holy hammer, you’re righteous?”

Rogrim bristled. “I earned this title.”

Durn’s expression darkened. “Then prove it.”

He drew his sword.

"You want to ‘set things right’? Then fight me. If you can best me—not just in strength, but in conviction—then maybe I’ll believe you."

Pigrim took a step back. “Ohhh, this is going to be a good one.”

Rogrim raised the Oathbound Warhammer, eyes locked onto Durn.

The cavern fell silent. The whispering voices that had plagued them moments ago faded, as if even the spirits themselves wished to see what would happen next.

Sir Durn Steelvein stood tall, his greatsword resting lightly in his gauntleted grip. His armor was battered, but his stance was flawless—this was a warrior who had once stood among the greatest paladins of the Silver Anvil.

Across from him, Rogrim planted his feet firmly, gripping the Oathbound Warhammer. The sacred weapon hummed faintly with divine energy, as if it too sensed the weight of this moment.

Pigrim, wisely, took several steps back. “Right. Two stubborn dwarves, one holy hammer, one giant sword. This should be fun.”

Durn narrowed his eyes. “You’ve come all this way to call me an oathbreaker, boy. To tell me I was wrong.”

Rogrim gritted his teeth. “You abandoned your post. Left your brothers to die. And now you rot in this cave, listening to the voices of the damned. Tell me, Durn—was it worth it?”

The older dwarf smiled, but there was no humor in it. “Let’s find out.”

Then he moved.

Durn struck first—and he was fast.

His greatsword came down in an arc, aiming for Rogrim’s shoulder with a blow that could have split a man in two.

Rogrim barely raised his shield in time, the impact sending a shockwave up his arm.

Durn didn’t stop. He pivoted, bringing the blade low, forcing Rogrim to jump backward as the sword carved deep into the stone where he had just been standing.

Pigrim whistled. “Oh yeah. He’s good.”

Rogrim grinned despite himself.

“Aye,” he muttered. “But I’m better.”

He lunged forward, swinging the Oathbound Warhammer at Durn’s midsection.

The fallen knight barely had time to twist away, but Rogrim adjusted, bringing the hammer upward in a vicious counterstrike.

The warhammer connected with Durn's gauntlet, sending sparks flying and forcing him back a step.

Durn laughed, shaking out his hand. "Not bad. You actually know how to fight."

Rogrim rolled his shoulders. "Aye. And I fight for more than myself."

Durn's expression darkened.

"Do you?"

Durn pressed forward again, his sword a blur of steel.

Rogrim met him blow for blow, his warhammer and shield deflecting every strike—but Durn wasn't slowing down.

Pigrim watched, eyes darting between them. "Something's wrong…"

And then, it happened.

Durn's sword swept low, catching Rogrim off balance. With one brutal strike, he sent Rogrim's shield spinning away, forcing him to his knees.

The greatsword came up, poised for a killing blow.

But Durn hesitated.

The whispers returned, soft, poisonous.

"You are weak, Durn Steelvein… you hesitate, just as you did before… you cannot change…"

Rogrim, breathing hard, looked up at him.

And for the first time, he didn't see an enemy.

He saw a broken man.

Durn's hands trembled on the sword.

Pigrim muttered, "Come on, Rogrim… say something."

Rogrim took a deep breath.

"You're afraid," he said. "Afraid to make the wrong choice *again*."

Durn's grip tightened. "I made my choice long ago."

“No,” Rogrim said firmly, rising to his feet. “You *ran*. You let your failure define you. You’ve been hiding here, listening to ghosts, waiting for death to come for you.”

Durn’s jaw clenched.

Rogrim stepped forward, lowering his hammer.

“I’m giving you a choice, Durn.” His voice softened. “Come back. Be the paladin you were meant to be. Or stand here, sword in hand, and tell yourself that this cave is all you deserve.”

The whispers swirled, growing louder.

"He lies… you are beyond redemption… honor is a chain…"

Durn closed his eyes.

And for the first time in years… he ignored them.

With a deep, shuddering breath, he let his sword drop.

The whispers screamed in rage—but they could do nothing.

The cavern stilled.

Durn looked at his hands, as if seeing them for the first time.

“I was wrong,” he admitted. “Not just then. For all these years.”

He turned to Rogrim, his expression raw.

“You are a true paladin.”

Rogrim grinned. “Aye, lad. I know.”

Pigrim groaned. “And we’ll *never* hear the end of it.”

Durn knelt.

“I will return,” he said. “To face my brothers. To face justice. If Moradin wills it, I will serve again.”

Rogrim nodded. “Then let’s go home.”

The whispers vanished. The darkness receded.

And together, they left the cavern—as warriors of honor once more.

The High Priest stood waiting as Rogrim and Pigrim marched into the temple, Durn Steelvein walking beside them.

When the priests saw him, whispers spread through the chamber.

Durn dropped to his knees before the High Priest, bowing his head.

“I have returned,” he said. “To face judgment.”

The High Priest studied him for a long moment, then looked to Rogrim.

“You have done well,” he said. “This was no small task. You have proven that honor is not just about strength—but about wisdom.”

Rogrim grinned. “Aye. I tend to do that.”

Pigrim muttered, “He *really* doesn’t, but sure.”

The High Priest turned back to Durn.

“You will be given a chance to atone,” he said. “But the road will not be easy.”

Durn nodded. “I accept that.”

The High Priest then faced Rogrim once more.

“The Trial of Honor is complete,” he declared. “And now, Rogrim, your next trial awaits.”

Rogrim blinked. “Wait. Another?”

Pigrim laughed. “Oh, this is great.”

The High Priest smiled. “A paladin’s journey is never finished.”

Rogrim sighed deeply.

Then, after a moment, he grinned.

The air in Moradin’s temple was heavy with the scent of incense and forge-smoke, the flickering braziers casting long shadows against the stone walls. Rogrim stood before the High Priest, still dust-covered from his journey back from the Haunted Caverns of Thal’Karash. Sir Durn Steelvein knelt beside him, awaiting judgment.

The High Priest’s gaze was unreadable as he looked at Rogrim. “You have passed the Trial of Honor. You have shown that a paladin’s duty is not simply to *strike down* the lost, but to save those who can still be redeemed.”

Rogrim grinned. “Aye, and now I’ve got a ghost-free, slightly less grumpy paladin to prove it.”

Pigrim muttered, “That’s one way to put it.”

The High Priest's expression darkened. "But not all can be redeemed. Not all *wish* to be saved." He took a step closer. "A paladin must also know when to deliver judgment."

Rogrim crossed his arms. "So what's the next test?"

The High Priest raised a hand, revealing a sealed scroll marked with the sigil of Moradin's justice.

"The city of Dunhollow suffers under the weight of corruption," he said. "Magistrate Torvan Stonepurse, a once-respected dwarf, has turned his back on righteousness. He takes bribes, allows slavers and criminals to walk free, and grows fat with wealth while his people suffer."

Rogrim's brow furrowed. "A dwarf turning on his own kin? Taking blood coin while his city rots?"

The High Priest nodded solemnly. "Aye. Your task is to bring him to justice. The Trial of Righteousness begins."

Rogrim took the scroll and unrolled it, scanning the details. Pigrim leaned over his shoulder. "So, let me get this straight. We go to this Dunhollow, prove this magistrate's a lying, bribing bastard, call him out, and if he doesn't fix his ways, we *kick down his door*?"

Rogrim smiled. "Aye. That about sums it up."

Pigrim clapped his hands together. "Fantastic. A whole city *full* of guards that *probably* like this guy, a crime ring, and a noble who *won't go down easy*. Nothing about this sounds simple or safe."

Rogrim grinned, shouldering the Oathbound Warhammer. "Good. I was getting bored."

The High Priest spoke one last warning. "Be wary, Rogrim. Torvan has many allies. He is loved by some and feared by others. A paladin must do more than *swing a hammer*—you must prove his guilt beyond doubt, or else the city itself may turn against you."

Rogrim nodded. "Aye. Justice must be seen. No dwarf should escape the truth."

With that, he turned on his heel, Pigrim groaning as he followed him out of the temple.

"Next stop, Dunhollow."

The road to Dunhollow was long and uneventful, but as they neared the city gates, Rogrim felt it immediately.

There was a weight in the air—not the kind of peace that came from good leadership, but the stillness of a place ruled by fear.

The guards at the gate were dwarves in fine armor, their beards neatly kept, but their eyes wary. These were not soldiers defending their home.

These were men enforcing the will of their master.

As Rogrim and Pigrim entered, they took in the streets of Dunhollow. Merchants still peddled their wares, smiths still hammered away at their forges, but there was something missing—joy.

No laughter, no carefree banter. The people moved quickly, eyes downcast, voices hushed.

Pigrim muttered under his breath, "This city *reeks* of bad business."

Rogrim nodded grimly. "Aye. We'll find the truth soon enough."

They set to work, visiting taverns, markets, and quiet alleyways, speaking to shopkeepers, workers, and the few brave enough to whisper of Torvan's misdeeds.

They learned the ugly truth: Merchants paid "protection fees" to keep their businesses safe—from *Torvan's own guards.* A slaver's ring operated freely, bribing the magistrate to look the other way. Thieves ruled the streets at night, while honest folk locked their doors and hoped to be spared. Anyone who spoke against Torvan mysteriously vanished.

Pigrim shook his head. "This city's rotten to the *stone*. How has no one done anything?"

A tavern keeper, an older dwarf with tired eyes, sighed. "Because the only justice in Dunhollow is the justice Torvan allows. His guards are loyal, his coin is deep, and anyone who tries to stand against him?"

He glanced toward the door.

"They disappear."

Rogrim gritted his teeth. "No more."

They had enough.

It was time to confront the magistrate.

At the highest point in Dunhollow stood the Magistrate's Tower, an imposing keep overlooking the city. Its stone walls were untouched by time, its gates guarded by men who served not justice, but gold.

Rogrim and Pigrim stood outside the tower's grand entrance.

Pigrim crossed his arms. "So. You planning to go in all righteous words and law, or are we skipping to the hammering part?"

Rogrim grinned. "Let's see how much Torvan loves talking first."

The guards crossed their halberds as they approached.

One of them sneered. "The Magistrate isn't seeing visitors."

Rogrim cracked his knuckles. "Oh, *he'll see me.*"

With one powerful step forward, Rogrim seized both weapons, twisted them aside, and shoved the guards apart.

Pigrim whistled. “Oh, we’re starting *this* way? *Alright then!*”

The doors burst open.

Inside, Torvan Stonepurse sat upon a lavish seat of carved stone, his robes embroidered with gold, rings adorning every finger.

He barely glanced up as Rogrim marched forward, flanked by wary guards.

Torvan sighed. “Ah. A paladin. Come to tell me how wicked I am?”

Rogrim slammed the scroll onto the magistrate’s desk. “I’ve got proof, Torvan. Witnesses, ledgers—*your own people* know what you are.”

Torvan finally looked up, his expression unreadable.

Then, slowly, he reached into his desk drawer, pulled out a pouch of gold, and set it between them.

He leaned forward, voice low and smooth.

“I am a practical man, paladin. And everyone has a price.”

The room was silent.

Pigrim tensed.

This was it.

This was Rogrim’s true test of righteousness.

Would he take the bribe and walk away?

Would he demand Torvan step down and atone?

Or would he bring judgment with steel and fire?

Rogrim stared at the gold.

Then, with a slow, deliberate motion, he picked it up.

Pigrim’s eyes widened. “Uh… Rogrim?”

Rogrim studied the pouch for a moment.

Then he threw it back into Torvan’s face.

The coins scattered across the floor.

Rogrim grinned fiercely.

“My price?” he said. “Justice.”

And with that, he drew the Oathbound Warhammer.

The golden coins clattered across the polished stone floor, the sound echoing through the grand chamber of Magistrate Torvan Stonepurse. The corrupt dwarf blinked in shock, his face twisting from surprise to rage.

Rogrim rolled his shoulders, gripping the Oathbound Warhammer tight. “You thought I came here to bargain?” he growled. “I came here to end you.”

Pigrim sighed. “Aaand here we go.”

Torvan snapped his fingers, and the guards surrounding the room drew their weapons. Halberds leveled, swords unsheathed, and the room erupted into chaos.

The first guard lunged, thrusting his halberd toward Rogrim’s chest—but Rogrim twisted aside, catching the polearm on his shield before smashing his warhammer into the guard’s ribs. The dwarf crumpled to the ground, wheezing in pain.

A second guard charged from behind, swinging a blade toward Rogrim’s back—only for Pigrim to leap onto his shoulders, knocking him off balance. “Oi, leave some for me!” the halfling yelled, stabbing his dagger into the guard’s shoulder before kicking off his head and flipping backward.

Torvan stood from his chair, backing toward a side door, his face twisting in frustration. “You fools! Do you know what I control in this city?!”

Rogrim grabbed a charging guard by the beard, headbutted him into unconsciousness, and pointed his hammer at Torvan. “Aye! And that’s why I’m *burning it to the ground!*”

Torvan snarled, disappearing into the side passage.

Rogrim cursed. “The coward’s running!”

Pigrim ducked a wild swing, shoving another guard into a pillar. “You take him, I’ll keep these lads busy!”

Rogrim didn’t hesitate.

He barreled through the side door, chasing after the fleeing magistrate.

The corridor led to a hidden chamber—a lavish vault, lined with gold bars, ledgers, and forbidden documents. Torvan stood before a hidden exit, frantically fumbling with a key.

Rogrim stalked forward, cracking his neck. “Nowhere left to run, Torvan.”

The magistrate spun, his hand trembling as he reached into his robes and pulled a dagger. "You think you're a hero, paladin?" he spat. "I have *built* this city! I have done what was necessary to keep it *running!*"

Rogrim laughed darkly. "Aye? And what's *necessary* about selling your own people to slavers? About letting thieves and murderers buy their way out of justice?"

Torvan tightened his grip on his dagger, desperation flashing in his eyes. "You don't understand. If you take me down, this city will collapse. The criminals will fight for power, and there'll be blood in the streets!"

Rogrim stopped, studying him for a long moment.

Then, he chuckled. "Good."

Torvan paled. "W-what?"

Rogrim stepped forward. "Let them fight. Let the rats eat each other—and when they're done, we'll rebuild it the right way."

Torvan screamed, lunging forward with the dagger.

Rogrim caught his wrist, twisting it violently, bones breaking. The magistrate cried out in pain as the dagger clattered to the floor.

Then, with one swift motion, Rogrim grabbed Torvan by his robe and hurled him across the room.

The magistrate crashed into a pile of gold, coins spilling around him as he groaned in pain.

Rogrim loomed over him, warhammer raised.

"Now," Rogrim growled. "You get one choice, Torvan."

The magistrate spat blood, glaring up at him. "And that is?"

"Do you face trial…" Rogrim said, voice like rolling thunder.

"…or do you face me?"

Torvan clutched his ribs, looking around at his fallen empire. The gold, the bribes, the guards who had failed to stop a single dwarf and a halfling.

He let out a ragged, shaking breath.

"…I surrender."

Rogrim nodded. "Smart lad."

The dwarf reached into his belt and pulled out a pair of iron shackles, snapping them around the magistrate's wrists.

The city of Dunhollow would have its justice.

By morning, word had spread: Magistrate Torvan Stonepurse was arrested.

His golden ledgers were exposed for all to see, proof of his crimes laid bare.

The people, once fearful, began to rise—the merchants, the workers, the honest dwarves of Dunhollow, demanding better.

Rogrim and Pigrim stood watching as a new council of leaders stepped forward—dwarves of honor, chosen by the people, not by wealth.

Pigrim nudged Rogrim. "So, we did it."

Rogrim took a deep swig of ale. "Aye."

Pigrim smiled. "No *fancy paladin title* this time?"

Rogrim shrugged. "Didn't do this for a title, lad." He glanced back at the people of Dunhollow, cheering their newfound freedom.

"…Did it because it was right."

Pigrim studied him for a long moment. Then he grinned. "You *might* actually be a paladin, after all."

Rogrim chuckled. "Aye. *Might be.*"

With Dunhollow freed, the two set off once more, the road stretching before them.

The open road stretched long before them, winding through rolling hills and scattered forests, the sky above painted in hues of deep orange and soft purple as the sun began its slow descent. The air was cool and crisp, carrying the distant scent of pine and damp earth.

Rogrim and Pigrim sat upon a flat rock near a small pond, resting their weary legs. Rogrim, ever the lord of his own making, leaned back, arms folded behind his head, his pipe smoldering with slow, curling trails of Blackweed smoke. A half-drained waterskin of ale rested on his stomach, his boots kicked off, toes wiggling in satisfaction.

Pigrim, sitting nearby, chewed on a blade of grass, his usual sarcasm absent. For once, he wasn't grumbling about the road, the trials, or even Rogrim's endless speeches. No, he was listening.

And Rogrim, ever aware of his audience, took full advantage.

Rogrim took a deep pull from his pipe, exhaled a thick plume of smoke, and spoke, voice deep and unwavering.

“Lad, there are many warriors in this world. Some fight for gold, some for glory, some because they’ve got nothin’ else. But a *paladin*—a true paladin—fights for justice, honor, and righteousness.”

Pigrim, resting his arms on his knees, nodded slowly. “Aye… I’ve seen that now.”

Rogrim smiled. “Took ye long enough.”

Pigrim rolled his eyes but didn’t argue. “I’ll admit… I used to think you were just a loud, stubborn, hammer-swinging fool with a knack for getting us nearly killed.”

Rogrim chuckled. “Not an unfair assessment.”

Pigrim continued, “But you—you mean what you say. You don’t just talk about justice—you fight for it. Live by it.” He hesitated before adding, “And I… respect that.”

Rogrim’s grin widened. “About damn time, lad.”

Pigrim sighed. “Yeah, yeah. But let’s not make a big thing out of it.”

Rogrim sat up, stretching his back before grabbing his shield, inspecting it with a critical eye. “A paladin’s servant,” he mused, “is an honorable role. A *sacred* duty.”

Pigrim raised an eyebrow. “Oh, here we go…”

Rogrim ignored him and continued, his monologue in full swing.

“A paladin’s servant is more than a mere squire, more than a simple follower. He is the keeper of the warrior’s steel, the hand that readies his arms, the voice that speaks reason when fury blinds him.”

Pigrim muttered, “Could’ve just said ‘carry my shield,’ but sure, let’s make it poetic.”

Rogrim smiled. “Lad, from this day forth, you shall carry my shield. When battle comes, you will place it firmly in my hand, ready for justice to be delivered.”

Pigrim, for once, felt a strange sense of pride at the declaration. He straightened slightly, tapping the rim of the shield with his knuckles. “Aye. I’ll see it done.”

Rogrim clapped him on the shoulder. “Good lad. You’ll make a fine servant of justice yet.”

Pigrim sighed, but there was a small grin on his face. “Not sure *servant* is the word I’d use…”

Rogrim, fully embracing his newfound authority, gestured lazily toward the pond. “Now then, lad, seein’ as you’ve accepted your sacred duty, I find myself in need of a meal.”

Pigrim frowned. “Uh-huh.”

Rogrim waved a hand. “Fetch me some fish, cook it up nice—season it well, mind you—none of that bland travel rations nonsense.”

Pigrim sighed, standing up. “Aye, fine.”

Rogrim continued. “And while you’re at it—clean my weapons. The Oathbound Warhammer deserves to gleam, and justice should never be delivered with a dirty blade.”

Pigrim muttered under his breath. “Course not.”

Rogrim stretched again, taking another swig from his waterskin, savoring the rich taste of ale. “Oh, and polish my shield. A paladin’s shield should shine like the righteous dawn.”

Pigrim turned, deadpan. “Would you like me to scrub your boots too, oh mighty Lord of Justice?”

Rogrim grinned. “Ah, no need, lad—I took them off already.”

Pigrim ran a hand down his face, shaking his head. “Moradin give me strength.”

Rogrim laughed heartily, reclining once more, pipe smoke drifting into the evening air.

As Pigrim grumbled off to do his tasks, he couldn’t help but smile.

It was, after all, an honorable thing to serve a righteous warrior.

Even if that warrior was an insufferable, ale-drinking, pipe-smoking, battle-hungry dwarf.

The peaceful evening was shattered by the rustling of leaves and branches, followed by the sharp snap of a twig in the distance.

Rogrim, who had been comfortably sprawled on the ground, sprang up like a tornado, grabbing the Oathbound Warhammer with one hand and stretching the other outward.

“Shield!” he bellowed.

Pigrim, already on alert, hurled the shield straight into Rogrim’s grip before drawing his sword. His eyes darted toward the thick bushes, his breath quickening.

From the shadows, five orcs emerged, clad in tattered armor, their yellow eyes gleaming in the dim light.

But it wasn’t the orcs that stood out.

At their head, an elf warrior, tall and slender, stepped forward. His dark green cloak draped over polished silver armor, and his sharp, arrogant sneer was barely concealed beneath his elegant features.

He eyed Rogrim’s armor and weapons with open greed.

“Fine craftsmanship,” the elf mused, his voice smooth yet filled with disdain. “Dwarven steel, divine runes… *far too fine for a filthy little stump like you.*”

Rogrim grinned, unfazed. “Ah, an elf with a silver tongue. A shame it’s attached to such an ugly head.”

The elf ignored him, stepping forward. “I will make you an offer, dwarf. All your armor, all your weapons, your shiny hammer—you give them to me, and I shall allow you to crawl away like the bearded rat you are.”

Pigrim snorted. “Oh aye, and would you like a kiss on the cheek with that?”

The elf’s smile vanished. His eyes narrowed.

“You mock me?”

Rogrim let out a long, exaggerated sigh, as if thinking it over.

Then, without warning—

He booted the elf square in the arse.

The elf stumbled forward with a yelp, tripping over a rock and falling face-first into the dirt.

The orcs stared, their laughter uncertain.

Pigrim gasped. “Oh, *that’s* gonna go badly.”

The elf snapped his head up, his face contorted in pure fury.

“You wretched little worm!”

He shot to his feet, drawing his curved blade. “KILL THEM!”

The orcs roared, lunging forward like a pack of beasts.

Rogrim swung his hammer up, meeting the first with a crushing shield bash that sent him stumbling backward. But before he could follow up, another orc rushed from the side, slamming a massive fist into Rogrim’s chest.

The impact lifted him off his feet and sent him crashing into the ground, his head bouncing against the dirt. Dust and mud clung to his beard, his vision swimming.

Pigrim fared no better.

An orc caught him by the collar, hoisting him up before slamming him face-first into the rocky ground.

A sickening crack rang out as blood spurted from his nose and forehead.

Dazed, he barely registered the second orc grabbing him by the leg and hurling him through the air—

—straight into the pond.

SPLASH!

The orcs howled with laughter, their jeers echoing through the trees.

Rogrim, his face caked with dirt, struggled up to his elbows, his vision blurry.

The elf captain stood above him, sneering.

“Where is your righteous fury now, dwarf?”

Rogrim gritted his teeth.

His blood boiled.

A low, guttural growl rumbled in his chest.

Then—

The rage took him.

Rogrim’s eyes blazed with divine fury as he roared, his voice shaking the ground itself.

An orc stepped forward—

—and Rogrim’s hammer obliterated his skull in a single swing.

The laughter stopped.

The next orc barely had time to react before Rogrim smashed his knee backward, caving it in with a grotesque snap. The brute screamed as Rogrim brought the hammer down on his head, leaving nothing but pulp.

Pigrim, half-drowned, dragged himself from the pond. “Ohh… by the gods… remind me never to anger you…”

The remaining orcs hesitated, stepping back. They saw it now.

This was not a dwarf.

This was a storm of vengeance, clad in steel and wrath.

The elf, despite the sudden shift in fortune, snarled.

“You think I fear you, *beast?*” He lunged, blade flashing.

Rogrim sidestepped, caught the elf's wrist, and with a savage twist, wrenched his sword away.

Then, with one mighty swing, he brought the Oathbound Warhammer down on the elf's leg.

A sickening CRUNCH filled the air.

The elf's scream was unearthly, his leg shattered beyond recognition.

He collapsed, clutching the ruined limb, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

Rogrim, his fury not yet spent, grabbed the elf by the collar, dragging him toward the pond.

The elf clawed at the ground, eyes wild with terror. "No—WAIT—!"

Rogrim grinned darkly. "Wanna go for a swim, are we?"

And with one final heave, he threw the elf into the pond—then stepped in after him, shoving his head beneath the surface.

The elf kicked wildly, water frothing and splashing—but Rogrim held firm, his grip unrelenting.

The bubbles slowed.

Then stopped.

And the pond grew still.

Rogrim exhaled, stepping back onto the shore, his armor soaked, his beard dripping with water and mud.

Pigrim, lying on his back, bleeding, gazed up at him. "Well," he coughed. "That was… incredibly violent."

Rogrim sighed deeply, grabbing his waterskin of ale.

He took a long pull, then lit his pipe, puffing in satisfaction.

"Aye," he muttered, exhaling a slow, swirling cloud of blackish-gray smoke.

"…but righteous."

The road stretched long before them, winding through golden fields and patches of dense woodland, the morning sun casting long shadows upon the dirt path. Rogrim and Pigrim, bruised but victorious, packed up their things, shaking off the mud and dried blood from the previous night's battle.

Rogrim, still puffing on his pipe, rolled his shoulders, feeling the ache of battle settle into his bones. “A fine fight, that was,” he muttered, adjusting the Oathbound Warhammer on his back.

Pigrim, still rubbing his swollen nose, groaned. “Aye. Fantastic. I love getting my face smashed into the dirt and thrown into ponds. Really adds to the whole ‘heroic’ experience.”

Rogrim chuckled, thumping him on the back. “That’s the price of valor, lad. You’ll learn to enjoy it.”

Pigrim grumbled, but there was no true bitterness in his voice.

The road was peaceful, the sound of birds singing in the trees filling the air, until—

—on the horizon, a lone figure appeared.

An old man stood beneath a crooked oak tree, his long gray beard swaying gently in the breeze. He wore a tattered blue cloak, the hood resting upon his back, revealing a weathered face lined with years of wisdom. A staff of gnarled wood stood planted at his side, his hands resting upon it lightly.

As Rogrim and Pigrim approached, the old man lifted his head, his piercing blue eyes fixing upon them with quiet understanding.

Rogrim, ever the one to break silence first, nodded in greeting. “Hail, old one. You stand alone on the road. A traveler?”

The sage smiled faintly. “A traveler, yes. But also a watcher. A seeker of truths. A witness to the turning of the world.”

Pigrim whispered. “Oh great, we found a mystical one.”

Rogrim shot him a look before turning back to the sage. “And what truths do you seek, old one?”

The sage studied Rogrim for a long moment. Then, in a voice as steady as a river’s current, he said:

“I seek the truth of warriors and kings, of fools and sages, of the choices that shape destiny. And I see before me one who stands at the crossroads of fate.”

Rogrim raised an eyebrow. “You mean me?”

The sage nodded. “You, who wields a holy hammer but walks with the burden of mortality. You, who speaks of righteousness but knows the call of rage. You, who fights for justice, but is still learning what justice truly means.”

Rogrim’s jaw tightened. “I know what justice means.”

The sage shook his head. “Do you?”

Rogrim crossed his arms. “Aye. Justice is striking down evil when it rises. Shielding the weak. Punishing the wicked.”

The sage smiled faintly. “And when the wicked wear a crown? When the weak have blood on their hands? When striking one evil only gives birth to another? Tell me, paladin—will you always know the right path?”

Rogrim hesitated.

For the first time in a long while, he had no answer.

Pigrim, sensing an opportunity, smiled. “Aha! Someone’s making Rogrim think—this is a rare sight.”

Rogrim shot him a glare, then turned back to the sage.

“…A paladin’s duty is to act,” he said finally. “If I stand idle, if I question every choice, then evil wins while I hesitate.”

The sage nodded. “Action is important. But wisdom must guide strength. Even the mightiest warrior can become a beast if his sword is swung without thought.”

Rogrim grumbled but said nothing.

The sage stepped forward, leaning slightly on his wooden staff. “Tell me, warrior. Have you ever regretted a battle fought? A foe struck down? A judgment passed?”

Rogrim clenched his fist.

He thought of Torvan Stonepurse, the corrupt magistrate who had begged for his life when justice finally came for him. He thought of the elf captain he drowned, how he had felt no remorse as the life left his body.

“…No,” Rogrim muttered. “They got what they deserved.”

The sage tilted his head. “Perhaps they did. But I ask not if they deserved it. I ask if you ever wondered if there was another way.”

Pigrim blinked. “Alright, this is getting *far* too deep for me.”

Rogrim was silent for a long moment.

Then, finally, he exhaled. “I don’t know.”

The sage smiled warmly. “A good answer. Only fools believe they hold all wisdom.”

The sage settled onto a rock, gesturing for Rogrim and Pigrim to sit. They did so, the air heavy with unspoken thoughts.

“For all your strength, warrior, there will come a day when your hammer cannot solve the battle before you.”

Rogrim snorted. “Doubt it.”

The sage chuckled. “You will see.”

He lifted his gaze to the horizon, watching the wind ripple through the trees.

“Courage is not simply standing against foes. It is facing the weight of choice. A time will come when justice is unclear, when you must decide between two wrongs—or worse, when your heart calls for vengeance, and you must ask yourself if it is truly justice you seek.”

Rogrim’s grip tightened on his hammer. “And if I make the wrong choice?”

The sage exhaled softly. “Then you must have the wisdom to face it. And the courage to change.”

Rogrim frowned, staring into the distance.

He had never doubted himself before. Not in battle. Not in justice.

But the sage’s words burrowed deep.

Would there come a day when his righteous fury led him astray?

Would he see it when it came?

Pigrim, ever practical, cleared his throat. “So, wise old one, what would *you* have him do? Walk around asking criminals if they *want* to be good before he smashes their faces in?”

The sage laughed. “No. But I would have him listen. Learn. Weigh justice with wisdom.” He looked at Rogrim, eyes full of quiet understanding.

“Strength will guide you through battle. Wisdom will guide you through life.”

Rogrim sighed. “Aye… suppose that’s worth remembering.”

The sage smiled. “Then my work here is done.”

With that, the old man rose, dusting off his robes.

“Walk well, warrior. And when the time comes, remember this conversation.”

Then, before either of them could say another word, the sage turned and began walking down a small, unseen path into the woods, disappearing among the trees as though he had never been there at all.

For a long moment, Rogrim stood silently, staring after him.

Pigrim nudged him. “Alright, be honest—did he just curse us with a future moral dilemma?”

Rogrim grunted. “Feels like it.”

Pigrim sighed. “Fantastic.”

With that, the two warriors picked up their packs and continued their journey toward Gandor.

And for the first time in a long while…

Rogrim was lost in thought.

The road stretched long behind them, and ahead, the flickering firelight of their small camp cast dancing shadows against the surrounding trees. The sky above was a blanket of midnight blue, speckled with a thousand stars, and the air was cool and crisp, carrying the scent of damp earth and burning wood.

Rogrim sat cross-legged, his Oathbound Warhammer resting beside him, pipe smoldering between his lips. Pigrim lay stretched out, arms folded behind his head, staring at the sky. The flames crackled softly, filling the silence between them.

Then, Pigrim spoke.

“So… do you ever wonder if we’re doing this right?”

Rogrim arched an eyebrow, exhaling a slow stream of Blackweed smoke. “Right?”

Pigrim nodded. “Justice. Honor. Smashing in skulls. Y’know… the whole *paladin* business.”

Rogrim grunted. “Aye, and what of it?”

Pigrim sat up, leaning forward. “Well, take that elf captain we fought. We didn’t exactly give him much of a chance, did we?”

Rogrim snorted, tapping his pipe against a rock. “Oh, aye, should’ve invited him to tea first. Maybe asked nicely if he’d hand over his sword.”

Pigrim rolled his eyes. “That’s not what I mean. I mean—do you ever wonder if some of the ones we fight might not be *completely* evil?”

Rogrim was silent for a moment, then smiled. “Pigrim, lad, there’s a simple rule to it: if someone demands my weapons and armor, they’re probably not a misunderstood saint.”

Pigrim chuckled. “Fair. But what about Torvan? He was corrupt, aye, but he *claimed* he was holding the city together.”

Rogrim’s jaw tightened slightly. “He let slavers run free. Took gold instead of enforcing the law. Let good folk suffer. You don’t call that evil?”

Pigrim sighed. “Aye, it was wrong—I’m not saying it wasn’t. But what if he was right about the chaos that would follow?” He gestured toward the road. “We left Dunhollow in a *riot*. The whole city’s probably still tearing itself apart over who gets to lead.”

Rogrim puffed on his pipe, exhaling thoughtfully. “So what, then? We let men like him stay in power? Let villains rule, just because taking them down makes a mess?”

Pigrim rubbed his chin. “No… but maybe justice isn’t always about tearing down. Maybe it’s about building up, too.”

Rogrim grunted. “Aye. And that’s why we put good folk in charge after we clean house.”

Pigrim smiled. “Right. And you think all those ‘good folk’ will *stay* good? That they won’t fall into the same temptations as Torvan?”

Rogrim frowned. “…If they do, we’ll knock ‘em down too.”

Pigrim chuckled, shaking his head. “By Moradin, you’re a simple one.”

Rogrim grinned, taking another swig of ale from his waterskin. “Aye, but I sleep *well* at night.”

Pigrim poked at the fire with a stick, his voice more serious now. “So tell me, Rogrim. What makes a paladin? Is it just… *righteous fury*? Is it just smiting the wicked?”

Rogrim pondered for a moment before answering.

“A paladin is a shield,” he said. “A shield against evil. Against tyranny, corruption, and darkness.”

Pigrim nodded. “And what if the darkness isn’t so easy to see?”

Rogrim frowned. “Explain.”

Pigrim leaned forward. “You always talk about smashing the wicked, but what if you’re wrong about someone? What if you swing your hammer, thinking it’s justice, and only realize later that the man you struck down wasn’t the true villain?”

Rogrim was quiet for a long moment.

Then, he let out a slow breath. “Then I’d have to live with it. And I’d have to make it right.”

Pigrim raised an eyebrow. “And *how* would you do that?”

Rogrim gritted his teeth. “By learning. By listening. By not being so damn stubborn that I can’t see when I’ve made a mistake.”

Pigrim smiled. “That sounds dangerously close to wisdom, Rogrim.”

Rogrim grumbled. “Aye, well. Don’t get used to it.”

The fire crackled between them, and for a while, neither spoke. Then, Pigrim asked, “Doesn’t it ever *weigh* on you?”

Rogrim frowned. “What?”

Pigrim gestured vaguely. “The burden of it all. Of being a paladin. Of carrying the hammer. Of making sure every fight you pick is the right one. That’s a lot for one dwarf.”

Rogrim let out a low chuckle, shaking his head.

“Nay, lad,” he said, staring up at the stars. “The *real* weight is doing nothing.”

Pigrim blinked.

“I’ve seen what happens when good folk do nothing. When tyrants rise because no one stood up. When innocents suffer because no one took action.”

Rogrim took a deep drag of his pipe, exhaling the smoke into the night air.

“Aye, lad. Being a paladin means carrying the weight of choice. But I’ll tell you this—”

He turned, staring Pigrim dead in the eyes.

“I’d rather carry that weight than let someone else suffer under it.”

Pigrim sat back, staring at the sky once more.

Trial of Etiquette

The grand halls of Moradin’s temple echoed with the heavy clank of armored boots as Rogrim and Pigrim strode in, their travel-worn cloaks dusty from the road. The scent of incense and forge-smoke filled the air, the golden braziers casting warm light over the ancient stone walls.

At the far end of the hall, seated upon a high granite throne, the High Priest of Moradin awaited them, his piercing eyes studying the two warriors as they approached.

Rogrim stood tall, planting his Oathbound Warhammer into the stone floor with a satisfying *thud*. “The Trial of Righteousness is done,” he declared. “Torvan Stonepurse is shackled, and Dunhollow is free.”

The High Priest nodded. “Your deeds are known, Rogrim. You have upheld justice, even when faced with temptation.” His gaze flickered to Pigrim. “And you, halfling?”

Pigrim shrugged, crossing his arms. “I… helped?”

Rogrim grinned, clapping him on the back. “Aye, lad, you did more than that. You carried my shield, you took a few good hits, and you made sure I didn’t throw a corrupt dwarf off a tower. That’s proper paladin’s work!”

The High Priest gave a slow, thoughtful nod. “Yes. And so, your next trial awaits.”

Rogrim’s grin widened. “Ah, good! Another battle! Another villain to strike down!”

The High Priest raised a hand.

“No.”

Rogrim blinked. “What?”

The High Priest leaned forward, his expression grave. “This will not be a trial of steel and battle. It will be a test of grace and restraint.”

Pigrim’s eyes widened. “Oh, *this* is going to be good.”

The High Priest continued. “The dwarves of Highhold Citadel have long maintained a trade alliance with the elves of Eldorae. However, tensions are rising. The elven queen has extended an invitation to a grand diplomatic banquet—a chance to secure the alliance.”

Rogrim frowned. “And what does this have to do with me?”

The High Priest’s expression did not change. “You will be the dwarven emissary.”

There was a long silence.

Then—

Pigrim burst into laughter.

“Rogrim?! At a fancy elven feast?!” He doubled over, gasping for breath. “Ohhh, by the gods, this is the best thing I’ve ever heard!”

Rogrim scowled. “What? Why me? I’m a warrior! A paladin! Not some flimsy court-dwarf!”

The High Priest’s eyes twinkled. “And yet, a paladin must learn all forms of diplomacy. Even those that do not involve breaking skulls.”

Pigrim wiped a tear from his eye. “I can’t wait for this. What’s the test? Try not to eat the table?”

The High Priest ignored him. “Your task, Rogrim, is to attend the Feast of Eternal Grace. A grand, six-hour banquet where elven customs must be respected. One misstep—one insult, one improper use of a fork—and the alliance could be doomed for decades.”

Rogrim folded his arms. “A feast? How hard could that be?”

The High Priest gave him a knowing look.

Pigrim smiled. “Oh, I dunno, Rogrim. Have you ever eaten a meal where you *weren’t* allowed to drink half a keg of ale and belch in satisfaction?”

Rogrim waved a hand dismissively. “Bah. Elves eat tiny food. I’ll manage.”

The High Priest rose. “This is your Trial of Etiquette, Rogrim. Not of battle, but of discipline. If you fail, you will have insulted an entire kingdom.”

Rogrim smiled. “Aye, aye, I’ll be on my best behavior.”

Pigrim muttered, “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

And so, with new purpose, the two set forth—this time, not for war, but for something far more dangerous.

A dinner party.

The journey to Eldorae was long and uneventful—for once, no bandits, no orcish ambushes, no haunted ruins.

Just an increasing sense of dread.

For Rogrim, it was not the battle ahead that made him uneasy. It was what awaited him at the table.

As the towering ivory spires of Eldorae came into view, Rogrim grumbled, adjusting his armor uncomfortably. “This whole thing’s foolish. If they want an alliance, why not seal it in battle? A good skirmish, an honest brawl—not all this fork-counting nonsense.”

Pigrim, walking beside him, grinned ear to ear. “Oh, aye, because what could possibly be more diplomatic than smashing an elf’s nose in?”

Rogrim grunted. “Better than sitting stiff like a carved statue for six hours.”

Pigrim patted his shoulder. “Try not to flip the table when they serve you *one tiny slice of carrot* and call it a course.”

Rogrim shot him a look.

“…They wouldn’t. Right?”

The gates of Eldorae swung open to reveal a city of unearthly beauty—crystalline towers, golden bridges stretching over glittering rivers, and gardens sculpted to perfection. The very air felt lighter, humming with magic and elven refinement.

Rogrim’s first thought: *Needs more stone. And forges.*

At the palace, they were greeted by tall, elegantly dressed elves, their expressions polite but distant. The elven steward gave Rogrim a once-over, his eyes lingering a moment too long on the dusty boots, the thick beard, the battle-scarred armor.

"Ah," the steward said, voice smooth as silk. "The… *esteemed* dwarf emissary."

Pigrim muttered, "You hear that pause? That's the sound of an elf dying inside."

Rogrim ignored them, stepping forward. "Aye. I'm Rogrim, Paladin of Moradin. Here for the feast."

The steward smiled faintly. "Indeed. Right this way."

The grand dining hall was a sight to behold.

A long silver table stretched the length of the chamber, draped in fine elven silks, glowing candles hovering mid-air above it. The chairs were intricately carved, far too delicate-looking for a dwarf of Rogrim's stature.

At the head of the table sat Queen Aerilith, her regal figure adorned in shimmering silver robes. Her golden hair cascaded down her shoulders, her violet eyes studying Rogrim with interest.

"Welcome, honored dwarf," she said, her voice smooth and graceful. "Tonight, we share in the Feast of Eternal Grace, in the hopes of strengthening our bonds."

Rogrim bowed stiffly. "Aye, uh… an honor."

Pigrim, already taking a seat, snickered under his breath.

The queen gestured elegantly. "Please, be seated."

Rogrim lowered himself onto the chair carefully, feeling the wood creak beneath his weight.

Pigrim whispered, "So far, so good."

Then the first course was served.

The moment the plate was set before Rogrim, he stared.

On a delicate silver dish, a single tiny leaf, drizzled in a whisper of sauce, lay in the center.

Rogrim blinked. "Where's the food?"

Pigrim, biting his lip to keep from laughing, leaned in. "That is the food."

Rogrim gritted his teeth. "That's not food. That's… a garnish."

The elf beside him—a noble with flowing golden hair—sighed dramatically. "Ah, such a quaint perspective."

Rogrim was about to respond when he noticed something worse.

Before him lay an array of utensils—twelve different forks, knives, and spoons, each more delicate than the last.

His paladin instincts screamed in panic.

He glanced at the elf next to him, watching him gracefully select a fork with the precision of a battle-hardened archer.

Rogrim reached for the largest fork—because surely, the biggest one was meant for eating.

Pigrim coughed loudly, nudging him. "*Not that one.*"

Rogrim scowled. "Why?"

"That's the fish fork."

"…There's no fish."

"Exactly."

Rogrim grunted, picked the second largest, and dug in.

The elves watched in silent horror as he devoured the tiny leaf in one bite.

The meal continued, each course more confusing than the last—slivers of delicate fruit, unrecognizable vegetables, strange glowing liquids served in thimble-sized glasses.

And then came the conversation.

The elf noble beside Rogrim turned with a polite smile. "Tell me, dwarf, what are your thoughts on the philosophy of transcendent artistry in the modern elven age?"

Rogrim stared at him.

"…What?"

The elf smiled. "The evolution of poetry, music, and the higher aesthetics of ethereal consciousness."

Rogrim blinked. "I… punch things."

Pigrim snorted ale through his nose.

By the fourth hour, Rogrim's stomach rumbled in betrayal.

The portions were microscopic, and the refined elven manner of eating was slowly driving him mad.

Then, he saw it.

At the far end of the table, a servant carried in a roast swan—a real meal.

His dwarven instincts took over.

Without thinking, Rogrim stood, reaching across the table—

—and grabbed the entire swan with his bare hands.

The hall fell silent.

The elves stared in absolute horror.

Pigrim covered his face. “Oh no.”

Queen Aerilith arched a single, perfect eyebrow. “A bold… choice.”

Rogrim, mid-bite, froze.

Then, slowly, he placed the swan back.

“…It was falling,” he said.

Pigrim groaned. “Rogrim, *sit down.*”

Feeling the weight of his mistakes, Rogrim did what any dwarf in distress would do.

He drank.

And drank.

The elven wine was sweet, fruity, and far too smooth. It did not burn like dwarven ale, so surely, it was weak.

It was not weak.

By the end of the night, Rogrim stood up abruptly, slammed a hand on the table, and challenged the queen’s royal guard to an arm-wrestling contest.

The queen sighed.

The feast was over.

By morning, Rogrim was informed—very politely—that he was permanently banned from all elven diplomatic dinners.

The alliance survived, but only barely.

Pigrim patted his back. “Well, Rogrim. You survived.”

Rogrim groaned, rubbing his head. “Elves are soft-bellied twigs, and their food is a crime against eating.”

Pigrim grinned. “So, what’s next?”

Rogrim took a deep swig of dwarven ale.

“Something with more fighting and less forks.”

The journey back to Gandor was… quieter than usual.

For once, Rogrim didn’t brag.

He didn’t boast of victory or glorious combat.

He just brooded.

Pigrim, walking beside him, smiled. “You alright there, Rogrim? You’re *awfully quiet*. Must be the shame of being the first dwarf in history to lose a fight against a dinner table.”

Rogrim exhaled through his nose, rubbing his temples. “Not a word, lad. Not. A. Word.”

Pigrim grinned. “Oh, I’ve got *plenty* of words.”

By the time they reached the great stone halls of Moradin’s temple, Rogrim had resigned himself to his fate.

The High Priest, seated upon his granite throne, studied him with a knowing expression.

“I have received word of your… *diplomatic efforts,*” he said.

Rogrim folded his arms. “The alliance stands. That’s what matters.”

The High Priest nodded. “Aye. Though I believe the elves have issued a formal declaration of… banishment.”

Pigrim, grinning ear to ear, pulled a scroll from his belt. “Oh aye, here it is. ‘Let it be known that Rogrim, Son of Durgran, is forever forbidden from partaking in the Feast of Eternal Grace, nor any other gathering requiring—’”

Rogrim snatched the scroll and threw it into the nearest fire brazier.

The High Priest sighed. “While unorthodox, you have… *completed* your trial.”

Rogrim perked up. “Aye? Then what’s next? A proper fight, perhaps?”

The High Priest smiled faintly.

“Indeed. Your next trial will test your steel, your will, and your endurance.”

Rogrim's grin returned. "Aye! Now this is more like it!"

The High Priest leaned forward.

"A great pilgrimage is undertaken once a generation," the High Priest explained. "A journey of three hundred miles through the Frozen Wastes of Thragdum. A test of grit, strength, and fortitude."

Rogrim grinned. "Three hundred miles? Bah, that's nothing."

The High Priest raised a hand. "You must do so wearing full plate armor, carrying a sacred anvil upon your back."

Rogrim's smile faltered. "…A *what*?"

Pigrim blinked. "Did he say *anvil*?"

The High Priest continued. "The Anvil of the Forgebound, a sacred relic of Moradin, must be carried the entire way to the Halls of Hammerdeep. No mounts, no rest, and no assistance."

Rogrim stared.

Pigrim whistled. "That's a *lot* of iron to lug through the snow, Rogrim."

The High Priest folded his hands. "This is the Trial of Endurance. Strength of body, will, and spirit. Should you falter, you will bring shame upon yourself and the order."

Rogrim was silent for a long moment.

Then, finally, he grinned.

"Fine." He cracked his knuckles. "I'll march that damn anvil across the ice and back twice if I have to."

The High Priest nodded. "Then prepare yourself. The pilgrimage begins at dawn."

Pigrim patted Rogrim's shoulder. "You know, carrying an anvil for miles sounds *almost* as bad as your last trial."

Rogrim exhaled. "Aye… but at least I won't have to use twelve bloody forks."

Morning came far too soon.

Rogrim stood at the temple's frost-covered courtyard, staring at his burden—a massive solid iron anvil, its surface inscribed with runes of Moradin's blessing. It rested on a thick leather harness, reinforced with iron clasps—designed to be worn on the back like a pack.

Pigrim whistled. "That's a fine anvil." He tapped it, nodding. "Really heavy, too."

Rogrim grunted. "Aye. And I'm supposed to march three hundred miles with it."

The High Priest approached, his expression solemn. “This is the Anvil of the Forgebound, blessed by Moradin himself. It represents duty, strength, and sacrifice. A paladin must carry more than weapons—he must carry the weight of his oaths.”

Rogrim adjusted the harness, feeling the immense weight settle onto his shoulders. It was like having a second dwarf strapped to his back.

The High Priest nodded. “You will walk the Frozen Wastes of Thragdum, where biting winds and snowstorms will test your resolve. You will have no assistance, no mount, no rest beyond what the land provides.”

Pigrim crossed his arms. “And what am I supposed to do while Rogrim is out there suffering?”

The High Priest handed Pigrim a scroll. “You shall follow alongside… to record his progress.”

Pigrim’s eyes widened. “Wait. You mean I don’t have to carry an anvil?”

The High Priest nodded.

Pigrim turned to Rogrim, grinning ear to ear. “Oh, this is fantastic. I get to watch you suffer and write it down for history.”

Rogrim scowled. “Aye, well. Don’t fall behind, lad.”

The journey began at the gates of Gandor, leading into the Frozen Wastes of Thragdum—a vast, snow-covered tundra where the wind howled like angry spirits. The sky was gray and endless, the horizon a desolate stretch of white.

With every step, the anvil weighed down harder.

With every gust of wind, the cold bit deeper.

Pigrim, wrapped in a thick cloak, strolled alongside Rogrim, writing on his scroll.

“Day one,” he muttered. “Rogrim looks miserable.”

Rogrim growled. “I can still swing my hammer, lad.”

Pigrim smiled. “Not very fast, I imagine.”

By nightfall, the wind had turned vicious. Snow lashed against them, the cold creeping through armor and flesh alike.

Rogrim set down the anvil, breathing heavily. His legs burned, his shoulders ached, but his spirit held firm.

Pigrim, meanwhile, was happily setting up a small fire.

“Alright,” he said cheerfully. “What’s for dinner?”

Rogrim stared at him. “You’re supposed to be recording my struggles.”

Pigrim nodded. “Aye. And I’m recording that I’m doing just fine.”

Rogrim muttered curses under his breath as he gnawed on frozen rations.

For days, they trudged through the snow, past frozen lakes, over treacherous cliffs, through valleys buried in ice.

Pigrim’s notes became increasingly entertaining.

Day Three: *Rogrim has started talking to the anvil. The anvil has not responded.*

Day Five: *Rogrim attempted to insult the wind. The wind does not seem to care.*

Day Six: *I asked Rogrim if he regretted this. He threw a snowball at me. I have recorded this as a “maybe.”*

Rogrim, meanwhile, gritted his teeth and pressed on.

The weight was unbearable.

The cold was relentless.

But he would not break.

On the tenth night, as they camped near the edge of a frozen ravine, a howl split the air.

Pigrim froze. “Oh. That didn’t sound good.”

Emerging from the snowy mist, their eyes glowing like embers, came a pack of six massive ice wolves. Their fur was white as the blizzard, their fangs long as daggers.

Rogrim, despite his exhaustion, grinned. “Finally. A proper challenge.”

Pigrim shook his head. “Only you would say that.”

The wolves circled, snarling, their breath misting in the frigid air.

Rogrim cracked his neck. “Lad. Shield.”

Pigrim tossed it just in time—Rogrim caught it midair, bracing himself as the first wolf leapt.

The wolf lunged—Rogrim raised his shield, deflecting its bite before swinging the Oathbound Warhammer into its ribs. The impact sent it skidding across the ice, yelping.

Another wolf snapped at his leg, tearing into his armor. Rogrim grunted in pain, bringing his hammer down hard—the wolf crumpled into the snow.

Pigrim, meanwhile, was dodging frantically, swinging his sword. “I am not built for wolf fights, Rogrim!”

Rogrim grabbed a lunging wolf midair, slammed it into the anvil, and sent it sprawling.

Pigrim blinked. “…Did you just use the anvil as a weapon?”

Rogrim grinned. “Aye. Might as well make it useful.”

The last wolf snarled, eyes locked on Rogrim. It crouched, muscles coiled to spring.

Then—it lunged.

Rogrim, breathing hard, planted his feet.

With one final swing, he brought his warhammer crashing down—and the wolf collapsed, its body sinking into the snow.

Silence fell over the Frozen Wastes.

Pigrim, covered in snow and wolf fur, sat down heavily. “Well. That was… *cold*.”

Rogrim, panting, wiped blood from his lip. “Aye. But we’re still standing.”

At dawn, they reached the Halls of Hammerdeep. The ancient stone fortress, carved into the mountain, loomed massive before them.

Rogrim took the final steps toward the temple doors, the Anvil of the Forgebound still on his back.

Then, with a final grunt of effort, he set it down.

The doors opened, and the priests of Hammerdeep stepped forward, their eyes full of reverence.

“You have endured,” one priest said. “You have carried the weight of duty and honor. You are worthy.”

Rogrim, exhausted, simply nodded.

Pigrim patted his shoulder. “See? *Easy.*”

Rogrim glared. “Carry the anvil back, lad.”

Pigrim paled. “Oh. No, no, I *think* that’s your job.”

After the brutal Iron March, Rogrim and Pigrim staggered into the village of Bramblebrook, their bodies still aching from the freezing journey.

The tavern, "The Boar & Barrel," was a welcome sight—a cozy, fire-lit hall where the scent of roast meat, fresh bread, and spiced ale filled the air. The place was lively, full of chatting villagers, but Rogrim cared for only one thing.

Stomping to the bar, he slapped down a gold coin and bellowed, “Your biggest, steaming mug of tea!”

The tavern fell silent.

Every villager turned to stare at him.

Pigrim looked around, then leaned in. “Rogrim… you *just* walked into a dwarven tavern and ordered herbal tea.”

Rogrim, lips cracked from the cold, fingers bluish from frostbite, growled, “Aye, and what of it?”

The barkeep, after a long pause, nodded solemnly. “You’ve had a rough journey, I see.”

A massive iron-banded mug was placed before him, steaming with hot mountain tea, infused with honey and wild herbs.

Rogrim gripped it with both hands, bringing it to his lips—

—and gulped it down in a single go.

Pigrim, watching this, shook his head. “This might be the most disturbing thing I’ve ever seen you do.”

Rogrim slammed the empty mug down. “*More.*”

For five hours, they sat by the hearth, thawing out from their frozen misery.

By the time the warmth fully returned, Rogrim slammed his fists on the table.

“Enough tea! ALE! MEAT!”

The tavern cheered, and soon, the pair were feasting like kings.

That’s when she approached.

A woman in a simple wool cloak, her expression grim, sat across from them. “You’re the dwarf who carried the holy anvil, aye?”

Rogrim wiped ale from his beard, nodding. “Aye. What of it?”

The woman leaned in.

“We need your help,” she whispered.

Rogrim's eyes sharpened. "Aye? Bandits? A beast? A necromancer?"

The woman swallowed nervously.

"…It's a goose."

Pigrim spat out his ale.

The woman, Marella, explained in hushed tones.

"For years, our village has been terrorized by a beast most vile and relentless."

Rogrim leaned in. "Aye? Describe it."

She nodded grimly. "It is swift as a striking snake, its beady eyes filled with malice. It has driven off knights, hunters, even druids."

Rogrim nodded, clenching his fists. "Aye, a worthy foe. What manner of beast is it? A direwolf? A corrupted stag?"

Marella's voice dropped to a whisper.

"…It is Sir Puddlefoot."

Rogrim frowned. "Who?"

Pigrim, meanwhile, was turning red from suppressed laughter.

Marella continued, eyes dark with fear. "A goose."

Rogrim's face remained blank. "…A *goose?*"

Marella nodded gravely. "Not just any goose. The goose. The bane of Bramblebrook."

Pigrim, wheezing, whispered, "Oh, this is *better* than the elven feast."

Rogrim scoffed. "A goose? I've slain undead knights, orc warlords, and demons. You think a bloody goose will stop me?"

Marella shook her head. "You are not the first warrior to say this."

Pigrim leaned forward, grinning. "Aye, and *where* are they now?"

Marella hesitated. "…A few fled the village in shame. One had his helmet stolen and thrown into the river. The last… *we do not speak of the last.*"

Rogrim stood, rolling his shoulders. "Fine. Show me the beast."

The village gathered at the edge of the pond, watching nervously as Rogrim stood ready, warhammer slung over his back, arms crossed.

Pigrim, standing off to the side, whispered to a nearby villager, “What’s the goose’s body count?”

The man shuddered. “Too many.”

Then—

Honk.

A single sound pierced the silence.

The villagers gasped, some stepping back.

From the tall reeds, it emerged.

A massive white goose, its black eyes soulless, its beak slightly crooked from years of battle. Its chest puffed with arrogance, its webbed feet silent against the mud.

Sir Puddlefoot.

Rogrim snorted. “I’ve fought bigger.”

Then, in a blur of motion, the goose charged.

Rogrim lunged, hands outstretched.

Sir Puddlefoot dodged at the last second, snapping his beak onto Rogrim’s glove and tearing it off.

“Damn it!” Rogrim roared as the goose flung it into the mud.

Rogrim charged forward.

Sir Puddlefoot ducked, twisted, and bit Rogrim’s boot.

Rogrim tripped, face-planting into the dirt.

The goose stood on his back, triumphant.

Villagers clapped politely.

Pigrim, wheezing with laughter, tossed a fishing net.

Sir Puddlefoot jumped, *twisting midair*, and landed on Rogrim’s helmet.

It honked victoriously.

Then— It stole the helmet and ran.

“BY MORADIN’S BEARD!” Rogrim bellowed, chasing after it.

The goose darted through the village, dragging the helmet through the mud.

Straight into the tavern.

Inside, villagers watched as Sir Puddlefoot leaped onto a table, honking triumphantly.

Rogrim stormed in, slipping on a puddle of ale—

And crashed through a table.

The villagers erupted into laughter.

Sir Puddlefoot stood atop the wreckage, still clutching Rogrim's mud-covered helmet.

Pigrim entered, wiping tears from his eyes. "Rogrim, I think you've met your match."

Rogrim groaned. "One day, lad… one day… I will have vengeance."

By morning, Rogrim's helmet was returned—but the damage was done.

Rogrim sat glowering at his breakfast, chewing his fried bacon angrily. Across from him, Pigrim was grinning ear to ear, barely holding back another fit of laughter.

"So," Pigrim said, stirring his porridge. "Any plans today? Or shall we simply worship at the new statue of your greatest enemy?"

Rogrim scowled. "Lad, if ye don't shut your mouth, I'll make ye carry me shield with yer teeth."

Pigrim snorted. "Can't. Still covered in mud from yesterday's grand battle."

Rogrim gritted his teeth. "That goose—that cursed, unholy terror—will be dealt with today."

Pigrim chuckled. "Oh, aye? How?"

Rogrim slammed a fist on the table. "With honor, cunning, and determination."

Pigrim sighed. "So… *brute force and luck*, then?"

Rogrim nodded. "Aye."

The villagers gathered once more, whispering as Rogrim and Pigrim stood at the edge of the pond, eyes locked on the silent reeds where Sir Puddlefoot lurked.

Rogrim cracked his knuckles. "Alright, beastie. Ye've had yer fun."

Silence. Then— Honk.

A blur of white feathers shot out of the reeds like an arrow, webbed feet slapping against the dirt.

Rogrim lunged.

Sir Puddlefoot sidestepped.

Rogrim's momentum carried him forward—

—straight down the muddy hill behind the pond.

The moment his boots hit the slope, Rogrim realized his mistake.

His legs slipped.

His arms flailed.

And then—

"OH FOR THE LOVE OF—"

With a mighty THUD, the great paladin of Moradin tumbled down the hill, bouncing off rocks and bushes like a poorly-thrown barrel.

Pigrim, watching from above, wheezed. "This is the greatest day of my life."

The villagers cheered.

Sir Puddlefoot, standing proudly at the top, honked in triumph.

Trying to hold back his laughter, Pigrim took a step forward—

—and immediately slipped into a massive pile of mud.

"ARGH—"

With a wet splatter, Pigrim landed face-first, his entire body now one with the earth.

The villagers clapped politely.

One of them wiped a tear. "Best entertainment we've had in years."

Rogrim, covered in bruises, stomped back up the hill.

"Alright," he growled, spitting out dirt. "New plan."

Pigrim, still lying in the mud, lifted a hand weakly. "Please tell me it involves *burning this place down.*"

Rogrim shook his head. "Nay. We do it properly."

Pigrim sighed. "Which means?"

Rogrim pulled out a large burlap sack.

Pigrim stared. “That’s your brilliant plan?”

Rogrim grinned. “Aye. It’s time for some good old-fashioned dwarven ingenuity.”

With Pigrim as bait, the plan was set.

The halfling, grumbling and still covered in mud, stood in the open. “This is humiliating.”

Rogrim crouched nearby, sack in hand, waiting for the moment to strike.

Then— Honk. Sir Puddlefoot charged.

Pigrim screamed. Rogrim sprang into action, leaping at the beast, burlap sack wide open—

The goose twisted mid-air, almost dodging—

But Rogrim was ready.

With a mighty ROAR, he snatched the beast from the ground, trapping it inside the sack!

The village erupted into cheers!

Rogrim held the squirming sack triumphantly. “VICTORY AT LAST!”

From inside, a muffled HOOONK of protest could be heard.

Pigrim, lying face-up in the dirt, groaned. “I *hate* this town.”

The next morning, they set out for the druid grove, escorting the furious goose in the sack of justice.

Pigrim, still recovering, sighed. “So, remind me—why don’t we just… *smite* it?”

Rogrim shook his head. “Because, lad, a paladin doesn’t smite needlessly. We must do what’s just.”

Pigrim muttered, “Feels like justice would involve cooking it.”

After hours of walking, they finally arrived at the sacred druid grove—a peaceful forest, home to gentle creatures and ancient magics.

The druids, dressed in robes of emerald and brown, welcomed them warmly.

Rogrim, still gripping the sack, sighed. “Take it. Take this beast away from me.”

The druids opened the sack—

—Sir Puddlefoot burst out, flapping, honking, and vanishing into the trees.

One druid, smiling, bowed. “The balance is restored. You have done a great thing.”

Rogrim exhaled. “Aye. Feels like it.”

Pigrim crossed his arms. “*Does it?*”

Upon returning to Bramblebrook, the village erupted into cheers!

The tavern was opened freely, and the beer flowed like rivers.

“TO ROGRIM, THE GOOSE-SLAYER!” someone shouted.

Rogrim, lifting his ale, grinned. “Aye, I’ll drink to that!”

Pigrim leaned in. “You didn’t slay it.”

Rogrim shrugged. “Details.”

That night, they feasted like kings, the nightmare of Sir Puddlefoot finally behind them.

The journey back to Gandor was anything but peaceful.

For days, Rogrim and Pigrim trudged through the frozen wilderness, the wind howling like a vengeful spirit. The path ahead was barely visible, buried beneath layers of thick, unyielding snow, and the sky hung gray and oppressive above them.

Pigrim shivered violently, clutching his cloak tight around him. “By Moradin’s hairy knuckles, I think I’ve finally frozen solid.”

Rogrim, marching ahead, grunted. “Bah. Ye sound like a soft-bellied elf. This is proper weather. Builds character.”

Pigrim scoffed. “Aye? My character is about to fall over and die in the snow.”

Rogrim laughed, his breath rising in clouds of steam. “This is what separates warriors from weaklings, lad. The strong endure! The weak—”

CRACK.

Rogrim suddenly sank waist-deep into a hidden snowdrift.

Pigrim burst out laughing.

“Ah, yes,” the halfling wheezed. “The strong endure.”

Rogrim, growling, hauled himself free, shaking off the snow. “Laugh all ye want, but I’ll be the one digging yer frozen corpse out come morning.”

Pigrim sighed. “Aye, well, let’s hope we live to see morning.”

That night, the storm worsened.

They camped in the shadow of a rocky ridge, the fire barely flickering against the howling wind. Snow piled around them, making movement sluggish.

Then, from the darkness—

A low moan carried on the wind.

Rogrim sat up immediately, hand gripping his hammer. “Ye hear that?”

Pigrim, already awake, nodded. “Aye.”

From the storm, five figures emerged.

They were once men—but no longer.

Their flesh was pale and frostbitten, their eyes empty and glowing with eerie blue light. Ice clung to their ragged armor, and when they opened their mouths, snow and frozen breath spilled out instead of words.

Ice zombies.

Pigrim sighed. “Oh good. I was just thinking our night was going *too well.*”

The first zombie lunged.

Rogrim met it head-on, raising his shield just in time to block the rusted blade that nearly took his head off. With a mighty roar, he swung his hammer, crushing its frozen skull into shards of ice and bone.

The second zombie came from the side—Pigrim ducked low, rolling through the snow, and stabbed upward, his blade sinking into the creature’s ribs.

It didn’t stop.

The zombie grabbed Pigrim’s arm, its fingers burning with unnatural cold.

“COLD! COLD! VERY COLD!” Pigrim yelped, trying to pry himself free.

Rogrim turned, grabbing the zombie’s head with his gauntleted hand and tearing it clean off. “You alright, lad?”

Pigrim, panting, muttered, “No. No, I am not.”

The remaining zombies closed in, and for the next few moments, the fight was a brutal, clumsy struggle in knee-deep snow.

One zombie managed to swipe at Rogrim, leaving a gash on his forearm, but the dwarf smashed it into pieces with a two-handed hammer swing.

The last one leapt for Pigrim's throat—

—only for Rogrim to grab its leg and swing it like a club into a boulder.

It shattered.

The wind carried away the last echoes of their moans.

Pigrim, breathing hard, wiped sweat from his brow. "That was horrible."

Rogrim grunted, wiping zombie bits off his hammer. "Aye. Let's never speak of it again."

On the fourth day the snowstorm finally broke, revealing the jagged peaks of the northern cliffs. They walked in cold silence, their faces red and windburnt.

Then—a loud, guttural roar.

Rogrim froze. "…That wasn't the wind."

From the treeline, it emerged.

A massive creature, covered in thick fur, with the hulking body of a bear—but instead of a snout, its head was that of a giant owl, its massive golden eyes locking onto them with silent fury.

An owlbear.

Pigrim blinked. "That is wrong."

Rogrim sighed. "Aye. It is."

Then it charged.

Rogrim barely had time to raise his shield before the beast slammed into him, knocking him onto his back.

Pigrim tried to stab at its side, but the owlbear lashed out with a massive claw, sending him flying into a snowdrift.

Rogrim gritted his teeth and kicked the beast in the chest, forcing it back just enough for him to get to his feet.

"Come on then, beastie," he growled. "Ye think I fear ye?"

The owlbear shrieked and lunged again.

Rogrim dodged left, swinging his hammer low—the impact cracked against the beast's ribs, making it stagger.

Pigrim, popping out of the snow, leapt onto its back, stabbing wildly. “I don’t know what you are, but I do not like you!”

The owlbear roared, bucking wildly, sending Pigrim flying.

Rogrim took his chance—he stepped forward, raised his hammer high, and brought it crashing down onto the owlbear’s skull.

The beast collapsed.

Pigrim groaned from where he lay. “D’you think it was an *evil* owlbear?”

Rogrim panted. “It attacked *us*, lad. That’s evil enough.”

By the sixth day, they were close to Gandor—but trouble found them first.

A group of five bandits—three elves, two humans—stepped onto the road, blocking their path.

The leader, a smug-looking elven woman in leather armor, smiled. “Well, what have we here? Two travelers, looking awfully weighed down.”

Rogrim cracked his knuckles. “I’ve had a rough week, lass. Don’t test me.”

The elf sighed dramatically. “You dwarves. Always so grumpy. Now, here’s how this works—you hand over your weapons, coin, and valuables, and we let you walk away.”

Pigrim snorted. “Right. And if we say no?”

One of the humans grinned, drawing a blade. “Then we take it off your corpses.”

Rogrim rolled his shoulders. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

Then, battle erupted.

The first elf lunged at Rogrim—he raised his shield, letting the blade glance off the steel, then punched the elf square in the face.

Pigrim, dodging between two of them, stabbed one in the thigh, forcing him back.

The leader drew twin daggers, rushing Rogrim with lightning speed.

She slashed twice, carving into his shoulder—but Rogrim ignored the pain, grabbing her wrist and slamming her into the snow.

The last bandit, seeing the tide turn, tried to flee.

Pigrim threw a rock at his head.

The fight ended swiftly.

Rogrim stood over the defeated bandits, panting.

Pigrim wiped blood from his lip. “Can we please just get to Gandor without another damn fight?”

Rogrim sighed. “Aye, lad. That’d be nice.”

At long last, Rogrim and Pigrim stood once more before the towering gates of the Grand Temple of Moradin in Gandor. The stone arches loomed high, carved with intricate runes of protection and strength, and the great anvil sigil of Moradin gleamed proudly above the entrance.

The High Priest awaited them at the temple steps, his long white beard shifting gently in the wind. His piercing eyes studied Rogrim as he approached, his cloak tattered from battle, his armor scratched and dented from the trials of the frozen road.

Rogrim set his feet firmly before the priest, slamming a dust-covered fist to his chest.

“The Anvil of the Forgebound has been delivered. The march is done.”

The High Priest nodded, his gaze filled with solemn approval. “You have carried the burden of duty, Rogrim. You have endured hardship and battle, and yet you stand. You are ready.”

Rogrim raised a bushy eyebrow. “Aye? Ready for what?”

The High Priest gestured toward a heavy, ironbound door. “For the next step. Follow me.”

Beyond the door lay a ceremonial chamber, lit only by golden braziers and the soft glow of runes inscribed upon the stone floor. The air was thick with the scent of burning incense and iron, and in the center of the chamber rested a great stone altar, upon which lay a massive open tome—the Codex of the Forgebound.

The High Priest turned to Rogrim, his voice deep and resonant.

“You have proven your strength, your endurance. But a paladin is more than a hammer and shield. He is the bearer of holy light. And so, you shall learn the prayers of the Justicar.”

Rogrim bowed his head, placing a hand over his heart. “Aye. I am ready.”

The High Priest placed a firm hand on Rogrim’s shoulder. “Kneel.”

Rogrim dropped to one knee, gripping the hilt of his hammer as the priest began to chant.

The sacred words of Moradin filled the air, their deep resonance vibrating through the stone. Then, the High Priest lifted his hands, and the Codex of the Forgebound glowed with a golden light.

“Repeat after me,” he commanded.

Rogrim’s voice joined the chant, and as he spoke the words, power surged through him, as if the very forge of creation burned within his soul.

The Oath of Unyielding Stone

"By the stone beneath my feet, by the hammer in my grasp,
I swear to shield the weak, to stand when others fall.
Let my bones be iron, my will unbroken.
Let no darkness pass while I yet draw breath."

The Prayer of the Forgebound

"Moradin, Keeper of the Forge, hear my call!
Grant me the strength to shape the world as steel in fire.
Let my strikes be true, my spirit unyielding,
And may my deeds be worthy of thy anvil!"

As Rogrim spoke the final words, the braziers flared brightly, and a warm, golden light wrapped around him, filling him with holy energy.

The High Priest smiled. “The fire of Moradin now burns within you, Rogrim. Wield it wisely.”

Rogrim rose to his feet, his hammer humming faintly with divine power. He exhaled, feeling a new strength settle into his bones.

Then, the High Priest clapped him on the shoulder.

“Now,” he said. “Get to work.”

As they stepped outside, the sound of hammering, saws, and shouting filled the air. The temple was undergoing a grand restoration, and builders, masons, and carpenters worked tirelessly to rebuild the crumbling walls and restore the shattered archways.

Rogrim blinked. “Ah. So that’s why ye brought me back.”

The High Priest smiled. “Even a paladin must learn humility in service. The temple must be rebuilt, and so you shall help.”

Pigrim, overhearing, grinned. “Oh, I *love* this. The great paladin of Moradin… a mere construction worker!”

Rogrim grumbled. “If I hear one word out of ye, lad, ye’ll be carrying bricks with yer teeth.”

Pigrim laughed. “Aye, aye. Let’s get to work.”

Rogrim and Pigrim were tasked with lifting and positioning massive stone blocks, each one weighing as much as a small wagon.

Rogrim, gritting his teeth, hoisted a block onto his shoulder, his muscles straining against the weight. “By Moradin’s beard, this is harder than swinging a bloody hammer.”

Pigrim, attempting to help, managed to lift a much smaller stone. “Aye, but at least stones don’t hit back.”

A nearby mason barked, “Careful, dwarf! That goes on the south wall, not the east!”

Rogrim grunted, adjusting the stone. “Aye, aye, I’m no bloody architect!”

Next, they were assigned to assist the woodworkers, helping set up scaffolding and reinforce support beams.

Pigrim, balancing on a wooden beam, muttered, “Alright, see, this is where we die.”

Rogrim, hammering a support in place, scoffed. “Bah, ye worry too much.”

Then, the scaffolding shuddered.

Pigrim yelped, grabbing a rope for dear life. “ROGRIM!”

Rogrim, holding onto a wooden beam, sighed. “Aye. That’s on me.”

They both crashed into a pile of sawdust below.

The carpenters stared down at them.

One shook his head. “Best keep them on the ground.”

After their failed scaffolding attempts, they were put to work mixing mortar and helping fit stones into place.

Pigrim, covered in dust, wiped his brow. “I’ve got lime in my boots.”

Rogrim, grinning, patted his back, leaving a massive white handprint. “Bah, a bit of dust builds character.”

Pigrim scowled. “We have very different ideas of character.”

After a full two months of sweat, dust, and aching muscles, the reconstruction was finally taking shape.

Rogrim and Pigrim sat on a pile of stone bricks, panting.

Pigrim sighed. “I think I’d rather fight a dragon than do this again.”

Rogrim nodded. “Aye… but it feels good.” He looked around at the rising walls, the restored pillars. “To build somethin’. To know it’ll stand for generations.”

Pigrim smiled. “You almost sound like a real paladin.”

Rogrim snorted. “Almost.”

The High Priest approached, nodding. “Well done, both of you. The temple will stand strong once more… thanks to your hands.”

Rogrim grinned. “Aye. Now, about that ale…”

Ironbreaker

After a long day of hauling stone and hammering beams, Rogrim and Pigrim finally had a moment of rest, enjoying a mug of ale by the temple fires. Their bodies ached, their hands were blistered, but there was a certain pride in their work.

That pride, however, was short-lived.

A temple acolyte approached them, bowing deeply. “Rogrim, Paladin of Moradin, the High Priest requests your presence in the sanctum. Immediately.”

Rogrim exhaled, setting his ale down. “Aye. Knew the peace wouldn’t last long.”

Pigrim groaned, slumping in his seat. “Can we at least finish drinking first?”

The acolyte shook his head.

Pigrim sighed. “Course not.”

They followed the acolyte through the sacred halls, past glowing rune-stones and flickering braziers, until they stood before the grand doors of the inner sanctum.

Inside, the High Priest of Moradin waited, his expression grim and heavy with purpose.

Rogrim knelt before the altar of Moradin, his warhammer resting against his shoulder. “You summoned me, High Priest.”

The elder dwarf nodded. “Aye, Rogrim. A great dishonor has fallen upon our kin. The Ironbreaker Clan has broken their sacred vow to Moradin.”

Rogrim’s brow furrowed. “Explain.”

The High Priest motioned toward the sacred forge, where an ancient anvil rested—now chipped and cracked, as if defiled by unworthy hands.

“The Ironbreaker Clan, once proud defenders of the dwarven faith, have forsaken their oaths and now serve a tyrannical warlord, one who seeks to conquer the lesser clans and rule through blood and chains.”

Rogrim's hands clenched into fists. "Oathbreakers."

The High Priest nodded. "Aye. And their betrayal must not stand."

The High Priest stepped forward, placing a firm hand on Rogrim's shoulder.

"You must lead a vanguard of faithful warriors to the Ironbreaker Hold. Deliver them one chance—renounce their warlord, or face Moradin's wrath."

Rogrim grinned grimly. "And if they refuse?"

The High Priest's voice was like thunder. "Then you will bring justice upon them."

Pigrim, standing to the side, cleared his throat. "Not that I don't love a good hopeless battle against impossible odds, but… we're talking about the Ironbreakers. Siege masters. Elite warriors. This isn't some drunken band of orcs."

The High Priest nodded. "Aye. Their warriors are legendary. Unyielding in battle. But their honor is in question—some among them do not support their leader's betrayal. Some fight only to defend their kin."

Rogrim stroked his beard thoughtfully. "Aye… that makes it a hard fight. But not an impossible one."

The High Priest stepped back. "You must also seek out their Clan Lord—a warrior of great renown, said to wield an ancient rune-forged warhammer. If you can defeat him in sacred duel, the Ironbreaker warriors may yet yield."

Rogrim cracked his knuckles. "A duel, eh? That, I can do.

The High Priest motioned to the damaged anvil.

"The warlord has stolen a holy relic of Moradin—the Sacred Anvil of the Justicar."

Rogrim frowned deeply. "They defiled a holy anvil?"

The High Priest nodded. "Aye. They use it now to forge weapons of war, tainted by their treachery. It must be reclaimed."

Rogrim grinned. "Aye."

The High Priest stepped forward, raising his hands in blessing.

"May Moradin's hammer guide your strikes. May your will be unbreakable as stone. And may the fires of the forge burn in your heart."

Rogrim bowed his head.

"By stone and steel, by fire and forge—we will not fail."

Pigrim, crossing his arms, muttered, “We might fail a *little*.”

Rogrim clapped him on the back. “Bah! Where’s yer faith, lad?”

Pigrim sighed. “Probably hiding in an Ironbreaker fortress, heavily guarded.”

Rogrim laughed. “Then we’ll just have to go get it back.”

With the blessing of the temple, Rogrim and Pigrim prepared to march into the heart of dwarven treachery.

The Ironbreaker Hold awaited.

For three days, Rogrim and Pigrim prepared for war. The temple of Moradin was alive with the ring of hammers, the chant of prayers, and the murmurs of warriors gathering their steel.

A force of twenty battle-hardened dwarves was assembled—paladins, templars, and veteran warriors of the faith. They were clad in heavy mail, their shields adorned with the sigil of Moradin, and their axes and warhammers blessed upon the sacred anvil.

The leader of the warband, a grizzled warrior named Thrain Stonefist, stepped forward. His beard was streaked with silver, and his shield bore deep scars from a hundred battles.

“Rogrim,” he said, his voice like grinding stone, “we march upon a fortress of warriors. We will break our foes, or we will die with honor. Are ye prepared for that?”

Rogrim grinned, gripping the Oathbound Warhammer. “Aye. And I’ll see ye on the other side of victory.”

Pigrim, standing beside them, muttered, “I swear, if I have to march through one more blizzard, I’m moving to a nice warm halfling village.”

Rogrim clapped him on the back. “Bah! Ye wouldn’t last a week without me.”

Pigrim grumbled. “That might actually be true, and it *upsets* me.”

With a final blessing from the High Priest, the warband set forth—their banners raised high, their war songs echoing through the frozen peaks.

The journey through the mountain passes was long and grueling. The winds howled, carrying flurries of snow and ice, turning the road into a treacherous battlefield against the elements.

Pigrim wrapped himself in thick furs, teeth chattering. “Are ye certain we couldn’t solve this with diplomacy?”

Rogrim snorted. “Aye. Diplomacy’s exactly what we’re doin’. I’ll use me hammer to talk some sense into them.”

Thrain grunted. “Aye, diplomacy with iron and steel. The old way.”

As they trudged forward, the fortress of the Ironbreaker Clan came into view.

Built into the side of the mountain, the hold was a bastion of war—thick stone walls, reinforced iron gates, and watchtowers bristling with ballistae. Fires burned upon the ramparts, and war drums rumbled in the distance.

Rogrim's grip tightened on his warhammer.

"Time to see if they still remember their oaths."

The warband approached the gates, their shields locked together, their presence imposing even against the towering fortress.

A voice rang out from above.

"Who comes to challenge the Ironbreakers?"

Rogrim stepped forward, his voice booming like thunder.

"I am Rogrim, sworn paladin of Moradin! And I bring the word of the temple!"

The gates creaked open, and a band of Ironbreaker warriors emerged, led by a massive, battle-scarred dwarf in black steel armor. His beard was braided with silver, and his eyes burned with conviction.

"I am Kordrim Blackaxe, warlord of the Ironbreakers. What business does Moradin's temple have with us?"

Rogrim raised his hammer.

"The High Priest declares ye oathbreakers. Ye have sided with a tyrant, forsaking the will of Moradin. I offer ye one chance: renounce this madness, or face justice."

Kordrim laughed darkly. "And if we refuse?"

Rogrim's eyes burned. "Then we take yer hold by storm."

Kordrim's smile faded. "Ye would bring war upon kin?"

Rogrim growled. "Ye started this when ye broke yer oaths. Now answer me."

Kordrim's jaw clenched. Then he raised a hand.

"ARCHERS!"

The battle erupted.

Arrows rained down from the ramparts, but the warband raised their shields, their ranks holding firm.

“CHARGE!” Rogrim roared.

Dwarves crashed against dwarves, the sound of steel on steel ringing through the mountain pass.

Rogrim swung his hammer, shattering an Ironbreaker’s shield, sending him crashing into the snow.

Pigrim danced between warriors, dodging axe swings, stabbing into weak spots in armor.

Thrain led the vanguard, his shield bashing enemies aside as they pushed toward the gate.

An Ironbreaker warrior charged Rogrim, war axe raised high—

—Rogrim caught the blow with his shield, then slammed his helmet into the warrior’s nose, sending him sprawling.

“Break the gate!” Thrain shouted.

Rogrim rushed forward, planting his feet. “Step aside, lads.”

He raised the Oathbound Warhammer high.

With a mighty roar, he brought it crashing down upon the iron gate.

The impact shook the mountain.

The gates splintered, then shattered, bursting open.

The Ironbreaker Hold lay open to the paladins of Moradin.

As the battle raged within the fortress, Rogrim and Pigrim pushed toward the throne chamber, where Kordrim Blackaxe awaited.

The warlord stood upon the great stone dais, his rune-forged warhammer resting upon his shoulder.

Kordrim glared at Rogrim.

“This was a mistake, paladin.”

Rogrim raised his hammer. “Aye. Yer mistake.”

Kordrim charged.

Their hammers clashed, sending out sparks of divine power.

Kordrim was fast, despite his size—he fought with the ferocity of a storm, his swings wild but crushing.

Rogrim ducked one blow, but Kordrim's knee slammed into his gut, sending him stumbling back.

Kordrim pressed the attack, bringing his warhammer down like a falling star.

Rogrim caught it with his shield, the force sending cracks through the stone beneath him.

With a roar, Rogrim twisted, knocking Kordrim's hammer aside and slamming his shield into the warlord's ribs.

The fight raged on, until finally—

Kordrim overextended.

Rogrim saw the opening.

With a final, thunderous strike, he brought the Oathbound Warhammer crashing into Kordrim's chest.

The warlord collapsed to his knees, coughing blood.

Rogrim stood over him, breathing heavily.

Kordrim stared up, his strength failing. "Ye… fight with the wrath of Moradin himself."

Rogrim raised his hammer. "Then yield."

Silence. Then— Kordrim nodded.

"It is done."

With Kordrim defeated, the Ironbreakers surrendered.

The Sacred Anvil of the Justicar was reclaimed, and the warlord's forces stood down.

As the paladins stood victorious, Rogrim looked upon the fortress.

Justice had been served.

Honor had been restored.

And the name of Moradin would be feared once more.

The battle was won. The Ironbreaker Hold, once a fortress of oathbreakers, now stood under the banner of Moradin once more. The last embers of combat faded, leaving only the sound of armored boots on stone, the groans of the wounded, and the solemn murmurs of dwarves reckoning with their fate.

Rogrim stood in the center of the great hall, his breath still heavy, his armor dented from battle, his hammer resting upon the floor, slick with blood and victory.

Kordrim Blackaxe, the defeated warlord, knelt before him, his hands bound in iron shackles. His face was bruised, his beard matted with sweat and dust, but his eyes held no fear—only resignation.

The remaining Ironbreaker warriors stood in silence, awaiting their fate. Some were wounded, leaning on their weapons, others stood defiant, but none spoke.

The war was over.

Now came the judgment.

Thrain Stonefist, the veteran paladin-captain, stepped forward, his warhammer still resting against his shoulder. "The oathbreakers are defeated, Rogrim. What say ye?"

Rogrim exhaled deeply, wiping a hand across his beard.

The rage of battle still lingered in his bones, but now, standing before his defeated kin, he felt a familiar weight press upon his shoulders.

Moradin's justice was not about vengeance. It was about restoration.

Rogrim turned to Kordrim Blackaxe, the warrior who had stood against him in single combat. "Ye fought for a false cause, but ye fought for your kin. I don't believe ye turned from Moradin out of greed or cruelty."

Kordrim looked up, his eyes dark with shame. "I followed a stronger hand. The warlord promised protection, power. I thought it was the only way." He glanced around at his fallen warriors. "I see now that I was wrong."

Rogrim nodded. "Aye. And now ye have one choice."

The hall fell silent.

Rogrim raised his voice, ensuring every Ironbreaker could hear.

"Renounce the false warlord. Swear your loyalty back to Moradin. Take up the hammer not as conquerors, but as protectors. If ye do this, ye will be granted mercy. Ye will live, and your clan will stand once more."

He paused, then added, his voice like thunder:

"But if any refuse—if any would still raise arms against Moradin's will—then let them face me now."

A long, tense silence.

Then, Kordrim bowed his head. "I swear it."

One by one, the Ironbreaker warriors fell to their knees, placing their weapons upon the stone floor.

The oaths of the past were reforged.

At the heart of the Ironbreaker Forge, beneath towering columns of black stone, lay the Sacred Anvil of the Justicar—stolen from Moradin's temple, now chained in blasphemous iron.

The paladins of the faith gathered around it, their torches flickering against the cavern walls.

Rogrim placed a hand upon the anvil, whispering a sacred prayer:

"By stone and steel, by forge and flame,
Let this anvil be reborn in Moradin's name.
The broken made whole, the lost now found,
May honor stand unshaken, steadfast and proud."

With a single mighty strike of his warhammer, the chains shattered. The anvil flared with golden light, its sacred runes burning anew, cleansed of the stain of treachery.

A great cheer erupted from the faithful warriors, their voices echoing through the halls of the Ironbreaker Hold.

The march back to Gandor was long, but not burdensome. The Ironbreaker warriors, now redeemed, walked alongside the paladins, their banners no longer symbols of betrayal, but of redemption.

As they approached the gates of the Grand Temple, the High Priest stood waiting, his gaze solemn yet proud.

Rogrim knelt before him, placing the Sacred Anvil before the altar.

"The honor of the faith is restored."

The High Priest placed a hand upon Rogrim's shoulder. "You have done more than restore a relic, Rogrim. You have forged a future where our kin need not shed blood over broken oaths."

Pigrim, standing off to the side, crossed his arms. "I'd still rather have just smashed them all and been done with it."

Rogrim grinned. "Aye, lad, but that wouldn't have been very paladin-like, now would it?"

Pigrim sighed. "I miss when you weren't so wise and righteous."

The Ironbreaker Clan had been redeemed, their honor restored, and the Sacred Anvil reclaimed. But the true enemy still remained—the false warlord, the one who had turned dwarves against dwarves, who sought to rule through chains and steel, not duty and faith.

And Rogrim knew that a reckoning was coming.

Standing before the great hall of the temple, surrounded by Ironbreaker warriors, paladins, and dwarven champions, Rogrim raised his hammer, his voice booming like thunder:

“The war is not yet finished. The one who led our kin astray still sits upon his stolen throne. He would have turned dwarves into slavers, brothers into foes—and that, I will not abide!”

The assembled warriors roared, pounding their weapons against their shields.

Thrain Stonefist, ever the grizzled veteran, nodded approvingly. “Aye, lad. It’s time to end this.”

Kordrim Blackaxe, once an enemy, now a sworn ally, stepped forward. His rune-forged warhammer gleamed under the torchlight. “I led my people into shame. Let me lead them into redemption.”

Rogrim clapped him on the shoulder. “Aye. We march together.”

Pigrim, standing off to the side, sighed. “Another war? Great. Can’t we do one job that doesn’t end with me nearly getting decapitated?”

Rogrim grinned. “Bah! What’s a little decapitation between friends?”

The warband laughed, and with that—the march began.

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After two weeks of marching, through snowy peaks and abandoned dwarven roads, the warband reached the fortress of the false warlord—a blackened hold, built into the side of a ruined mountain, its towers bristling with iron spikes and war banners of a new, false empire.

The gates were sealed, and atop the battlements, hundreds of warriors stood ready.

And on the highest balcony, watching from above, was the warlord himself.

He was a giant of a dwarf, clad in jagged black plate, his beard braided with golden rings, his eyes burning with cold fury.

With a booming voice, he called down:

“So. The faithful come at last. Have ye come to beg for mercy?”

Rogrim stepped forward, hammer resting upon his shoulder. “Aye,” he said, his grin wolfish. “But not for us.”

The warlord laughed. “Ye think ye can break my gates? Ye think ye can bring me down? I have an army. Ye have a handful of holy fools.”

Rogrim’s grin widened. “Then open the gates and let’s see what happens.”

The warlord’s smile faded. He raised a hand, and with a single motion—

The battle began.

The enemy rained arrows down upon them, but the dwarven warriors raised their shields, their formation unyielding as a mountain.

Thrain bellowed, “FORWARD! SHIELDS HIGH!”

With a mighty charge, the warband slammed into the fortress gate, hammers smashing against iron, axes hacking at wood, while paladins chanted prayers, their weapons glowing with Moradin’s blessing.

A massive iron portcullis blocked the way, but Rogrim grabbed hold, veins bulging as he lifted, roaring:

“MORADIN, GIVE ME STRENGTH!”

The gate groaned, and with one final heave, Rogrim ripped it free, tossing it aside.

“CHARGE!”

The dwarves stormed the courtyard, clashing with the warlord's forces, steel ringing against steel, the ground slick with blood and battle cries.

Pigrim, dodging between hulking brutes, stabbed an enemy in the back of the knee, making him collapse. "Rogrim! Why do we always end up in these situations?"

Rogrim, smashing an axe-wielding berserker into the mud, grinned. "Fate loves a good story, lad!"

The battle raged, until finally—Rogrim saw him.

The false warlord.

Standing atop the grand staircase, his rune-forged axe dripping with blood, waiting for him.

The battle faded into the background.

This was fate.

Rogrim ascended the stairs, boots echoing against the stone, until he stood face-to-face with his foe.

The warlord smiled. "I've slain dozens of fools like ye. What makes ye different?"

Rogrim rolled his shoulders. "I'll still be standing when this is over."

The warlord grunted. "We'll see."

Then he swung first.

The force of the axe strike sent Rogrim stumbling back, his shield denting under the impact.

The warlord was strong— faster than he looked. His blows came heavy, relentless, each strike meant to break bones and armor alike.

Rogrim ducked a cleaving blow, countering with a hammer strike to the ribs—but the warlord barely flinched, smashing his helmet into Rogrim's face.

Blood spilled into the snow.

Rogrim wiped his lip. "Aye… good fight."

The warlord laughed. "Ye won't be laughing soon."

Then—a mistake.

The warlord overextended.

Rogrim stepped in, planting his feet.

With a roar, he swung upward, his hammer colliding with the warlord's chin—

—sending the false tyrant flying backwards.

He crashed against the stone throne—his axe slipping from his grasp.

Rogrim loomed over him, breathing heavily.

The warlord, bleeding, coughing, tried to push himself up.

"Go on, then." He spat blood. "Finish it."

Rogrim lifted his hammer.

Then—he hesitated.

A paladin's duty was justice.

Not slaughter.

He lowered his weapon.

"Yer finished. Yield, and I let ye live."

The warlord stared at him. "Ye would… spare me?"

Rogrim nodded. "Aye. That's the difference between us."

The warlord exhaled, staring at the sky above.

Then—he closed his eyes.

"I yield."

The warlord's forces surrendered, their leaders captured.

The hold was reclaimed, its halls cleansed of tyranny.

Rogrim stood among his kin, battered, bloodied—but victorious.

Rogrim grinned. "A good fight, lad."

Pigrim sighed. "You and I have very different ideas of a good time."

With the war ended, the dwarves raised their mugs in victory, celebrating the restoration of their people.

The false warlord was no more.

And Rogrim's legend only grew.

Victory had been within their grasp.

The false warlord had fallen, his forces had yielded, and for a moment—just a moment—it seemed like the war was over.

But war is never so simple.

The sun had barely risen over the fortress of the false warlord when the horizon darkened with an army.

Reinforcements.

A hundred warriors, clad in black iron, marching under a banner of blood, their weapons sharp and thirsty for vengeance.

Rogrim and his warriors, still battered from battle, barely had time to brace themselves before the storm of steel crashed upon them.

The gates exploded inward, sending shards of wood and iron flying through the air.

Rogrim raised his shield as a massive shockwave sent him stumbling backward.

Thrain Stonefist barely had time to curse before an axe cleaved into his shoulder, sending him to his knees.

The Ironbreaker warriors, those who had only recently reclaimed their honor, were outnumbered, outmatched, and already weary from battle.

Yet they stood.

Rogrim roared, swinging his hammer in wide arcs, shattering a warrior's ribs, sending another sprawling to the ground.

Beside him, Pigrim fought valiantly, weaving between the hulking warriors, stabbing where he could, using speed over strength.

But the enemy was relentless.

One by one, Rogrim's warriors fell.

A mace slammed into his ribs, sending him crashing against the stone walls of the fortress.

A sword slashed across Pigrim's leg, cutting through flesh and bone—he screamed, collapsing to the ground.

And then—the warlord himself stepped forward.

Still bloodied, still bruised, but alive.

Rogrim, gasping for breath, lifted his hammer, only for the warlord to kick him in the chest, pinning him to the ground.

A wicked grin spread across the warlord's face.

"You shouldn't have let me live, paladin," the warlord sneered.

He crouched beside Rogrim, voice dripping with cruel amusement.

"Now… you're going to regret it."

He grabbed Pigrim by the collar, lifting him up.

The halfling groaned in pain, barely conscious, his leg hanging at an unnatural angle.

Rogrim, despite his bleeding wounds, tried to stand—

Only for the warlord to slam him back down.

Rogrim saw red.

But he was too weak to fight.

The warlord threw Pigrim to the ground, then looked at the remaining dwarves, laughing.

"Run, then! Crawl back to your High Priest! Tell him the war isn't over!"

He raised his axe, bringing it down toward Rogrim's head—

At the last second, Rogrim twisted, rolling free.

He grabbed Pigrim, slinging the unconscious halfling over his back, and with what little strength he had left—he ran.

The road back to Gandor was a blur of pain and shame.

Behind them, the last of the surviving dwarves limped through the snow, some barely able to stand.

Thrain was half-dragged by his brothers, his shoulder a ruin of blood and shattered bone.

Kordrim Blackaxe, once redeemed, now barely conscious, leaned on his warhammer for support.

And in the center of them all, Rogrim walked, beaten and humiliated, carrying Pigrim's broken body.

The wind howled, the cold biting into their wounds, but none of it hurt more than the sting of failure.

Pigrim stirred, his voice weak and slurred.

"…Rogrim?"

"Aye, lad?"

"Did… we win?"

Rogrim's jaw clenched.

"…Nay."

The halfling groaned. "Figures."

The temple gates opened, and the High Priest stepped forward, his aged face unreadable as he watched the broken warriors return.

The gathered priests and acolytes gasped at the sight. Never before had the warriors of Moradin returned in such disgrace.

Rogrim, breathing heavily, knelt before the High Priest, placing Pigrim gently on the ground.

Then, he spoke.

"We have been defeated."

The words burned his throat.

For a long moment, the High Priest said nothing.

Then, he nodded. "Come inside. We have much to discuss."

For weeks, Rogrim healed, his wounds tended by the temple's clerics.

Pigrim, despite his broken leg and arm, still found time to complain.

"If I'd known being yer shieldbearer meant getting crushed by warlords, I'd have picked a different career."

Rogrim smiled. "Ye signed up for this, lad."

Pigrim muttered, "I don't recall signing anything."

But there was no time for rest.

The High Priest summoned the warriors of the faith, the surviving paladins, the veterans of past wars, the chieftains who still held loyalty to Moradin.

Rogrim, still wrapped in bandages, stood before them.

“This war ain’t over.”

The warriors grunted in agreement.

“We fought with a handful of warriors. This time… we bring an army.”

He looked at the gathered chieftains, his voice ringing through the hall.

“I march again. But this time, I need every blade ye can spare. Will ye stand with me?”

A pause.

Then—a warlord rose.

“Aye. I’ll stand.”

Then another.

And another.

Soon, dozens of warriors stood before him, ready to march to war.

Thrain, now recovered, grinned. “Looks like we’re gettin’ another go at this, lad.”

Rogrim nodded. “Aye. But this time, we finish it.”

With his wounds healed and his strength restored, Rogrim set out on a new mission—not one of battle, but of words, honor, and duty.

The war was not over. The false warlord still sat upon his stolen throne, gathering his forces, believing himself invincible.

Rogrim intended to prove him wrong.

And for that—he needed an army.

For weeks, Rogrim traveled across the mountain holds, deep valleys, and hidden dwarven fortresses, speaking with the chieftains and thanes of the clans, calling upon the old oaths of loyalty to Moradin’s faith.

With Pigrim by his side—his arm still in a sling, but his tongue as sharp as ever—they knocked upon the great gates of the dwarven clans, seeking warriors for the coming war.

The Ironfist Clan was known for its unshakable pride and wealth, ruling the Dunhark mines —a fortress city carved deep into the black rock of the mountains.

In the hall of Thane Borik Ironfist, Rogrim stood before the stout chieftain, his beard adorned with golden rings, his fingers heavy with gemmed signets.

Borik snorted. “So, ye come askin’ for warriors, eh? To fight for the church?”

Rogrim nodded. “Aye. Not just for the church. For honor. For Moradin’s will. For the clans who refuse to bow to a cowardly tyrant.”

Borik stroked his beard. “Ye expect me to send my warriors off to die, do ye?”

Rogrim stepped forward, slamming his fist on the table. “I expect ye to remember yer blood. Ye sit here on gold and iron while yer kin bleed and suffer. The faith stands in peril—will ye be known as the thane who turned his back on Moradin’s will?”

Borik’s jaw tightened. His eyes flickered with conflict.

Then, he exhaled sharply.

“Ye bastard,” he muttered. “Fine. Twenty of my best warriors will ride with ye.”

Rogrim grinned. “Ye won’t regret it.”

The Thunderaxe Clan lived in the highest reaches of the mountains, their warriors known for their ferocity in battle and their mastery of warhorns.

Thane Haldor Thunderaxe greeted Rogrim with a booming laugh.

“Ye want my warriors? Ye should’ve sent a challenge! Let’s settle it with an axe-throwing contest!”

Rogrim smiled. “Fine. But when I win, ye give me thirty warriors.”

Haldor’s grin widened. “Done.”

By the end of the night, Rogrim stood victorious, having sunk his axe perfectly into the center of the target.

Haldor laughed. “Ye’ve got stones, Rogrim. My warriors march with ye.”

Deep in the frozen valleys, the Frostbeard Clan guarded the passes against frost giants and orc raiders.

Their thane, Jorik Frostbeard, was a silent, calculating dwarf, his words few but his axe heavy.

Rogrim stood before him, waiting patiently.

Jorik simply asked, “How many?”

Rogrim met his gaze. “Fifty.”

Jorik nodded.

“Done.”

Pigrim leaned in. “Well. That was easy.”

In the deep halls of Karak Gorunn, the Stonebreaker Clan built the greatest war machines of the dwarves.

Their thane, Morrik Stonebreaker, sat in his forge hall, surrounded by blueprints and schematics.

He looked up at Rogrim. “Ye need warriors? Ye’ll need siege weapons too.”

Rogrim grinned. “Aye.”

Morrik smiled. “Then take ten of my best smiths and a ballista.”

The Redmane Clan was famous for their bloodthirsty warriors, clad in furs, wielding great axes.

Thane Bror Redmane greeted Rogrim with a challenge.

“Fight me,” he growled. “If ye win, my berserkers ride with ye.”

The battle lasted only a minute.

Rogrim headbutted Bror so hard the thane stumbled backward, dazed.

Bror wiped blood from his nose and grinned. “I like ye. We march at dawn.”

The Goldhammer Clan had coin and mercenaries, but their thane, Dorin Goldhammer, was a skeptical dwarf.

“I prefer gold to battle, Rogrim,” he said. “Why should I send my men?”

Rogrim leaned in. “Because if we lose, the false warlord will come for ye next. Ye think he’ll let ye sit in yer halls, hoarding coin?”

Dorin hesitated.

Then sighed.

“Fine. Twenty warriors. No more.”

Rogrim nodded. “That’s all I need.”

In the ancient fire-temple of Moradin, the Ashenforge Clan kept the holy flames burning.

Thane Orrik Ashenforge, an elder dwarf, listened carefully to Rogrim’s words.

Then, he placed a hand upon his hammer.

“We march. Moradin wills it.”

The Battleborn Clan had no single stronghold—they traveled the lands as mercenaries, free warriors for hire.

Their leader, Rurik Battleborn, met Rogrim at a campfire.

“We fight for coin,” he said. “What do ye offer?”

Rogrim tossed a gold ring into the fire.

“The fate of our people.”

Rurik stared into the flames.

Then, he smiled.

“Ye got yourself an army.”

For weeks, the forges of Gandor burned bright, the sound of hammers on steel echoing through the great halls as dwarven smiths and artisans worked tirelessly, reforging armor, sharpening blades, and crafting new weapons of war.

The army of 200 warriors, drawn from eight great clans, gathered within the mountain strongholds, training day and night, preparing for the final reckoning.

Siege weapons—great dwarven ballistae, iron-plated battering rams, and catapults crafted by the Stonebreaker Clan—were assembled and loaded onto war carts, ready to march to battle.

And at the heart of it all, Rogrim stood—his armor now newly reforged, his hammer etched with fresh runes of divine power, his eyes burning with vengeance.

On the eve of the march, Rogrim stood before his assembled warriors in the grand stone chamber of Moradin’s temple. The air smelled of burning forge-coal and polished steel, and the banners of each clan hung high along the great pillars.

At the center of the chamber stood the High Priest, his staff in hand, his gaze heavy with purpose.

Rogrim stepped forward, raising his warhammer high.

"Brothers, sisters—we march at dawn."

A murmur of approval rippled through the gathered warriors.

Rogrim paced before them, his voice like thunder.

"The warlord believes he has won. He believes he has crushed us, that our faith is shattered."

He slammed his hammer against the stone floor, the sound reverberating through the chamber.

"But he has made a grave mistake."

His eyes burned as he looked upon his warriors.

"He did not break us. He only made us stronger."

The warriors gripped their weapons, nodding grimly.

"We will march upon his fortress, tear down his false throne, and cast his name into dust!"

The gathered warriors roared in agreement, slamming their fists against their chests.

The High Priest stepped forward, lifting his hands.

"By Moradin's will, this is your final blessing. Go forth, warriors of faith—and make your oaths true."

The warriors knelt as the blessing was spoken, and when they rose—they were ready for war.

At dawn, the gates of Gandor swung open, and the Army of Moradin marched forth, banners raised high, shields locking into formation.

The mountain passes trembled beneath the march of iron-clad boots, the war chants of the clans echoing through the valleys.

The air was thick with frost, the wind biting, but the warriors pressed on, unwavering.

By the third day, they reached the outskirts of the warlord's lands. Smoke rose in the distance, and scouts returned with reports—

The warlord had doubled his forces.

"Good," Rogrim grinned. "Means we won't have to chase them down."

As they neared the fortress, a group of mounted warriors approached, bearing the warlord's sigil.

A tall, scarred human mercenary—one of the warlord's chief enforcers—rode forward, stopping just before Rogrim's lines.

"Rogrim, paladin of Moradin," the mercenary sneered. "I see ye've crawled back for another beating."

Rogrim cracked his knuckles. "Aye. But this time, we've brought enough coffins for all of ye."

The mercenary laughed. "My lord offers you mercy—surrender now, and he'll allow your warriors to live."

Rogrim stepped forward.

"Tell yer warlord," he growled, "that I offer him a choice. Surrender now, and he dies clean. Refuse, and he'll be dragged from his throne like a beaten cur."

The mercenary's grin faded.

"So be it."

He turned his horse, galloping back toward the fortress.

Rogrim turned to his warriors.

"Prepare the siege weapons. We march at nightfall."

That evening, as the army made camp beyond the warlord's walls, Pigrim sat beside the fire, sharpening his blade with his one good hand.

"Rogrim," he muttered, "ye really think we can pull this off?"

Rogrim, watching the fortress in the distance, nodded.

"Aye," he said. "Because this time, we don't leave him breathing."

The warriors of Moradin gathered their strength, their weapons gleaming in the firelight.

The cold night air bit at their skin, but the warriors of Moradin felt no fear.

They stood in formation outside the fortress walls, their shields gleaming under the moonlight, their weapons sharpened, their resolve unshaken.

The warlord's fortress loomed ahead—tall, blackened stone, reinforced iron gates, and walls lined with archers and siege weapons.

The warhorns of the false warlord's army echoed from within, a clear warning—they were waiting.

But Rogrim's army had not come to wait.

They had come to end this.

Rogrim stood at the head of the warband, his warhammer resting against his shoulder. Beside him, Thrain Stonefist, Kordrim Blackaxe, and the other dwarven chieftains watched in grim silence.

Behind them, the catapults and ballistae had been positioned, manned by Stonebreaker engineers.

The siege was ready.

Rogrim took a deep breath, then raised his hammer high.

"LIGHT THE FLAMES!"

Torches flared to life as dwarven siege teams moved into position, preparing to rain fire and stone upon the enemy.

Pigrim, standing at Rogrim's side, adjusted his belt, still wincing from his healing wounds.

"Well," he muttered. "I'd say we should've come up with a clever plan, but I know you too well."

Rogrim grinned. "Aye, lad. The plan is war."

With a single roar from Rogrim, the battle began.

The siege weapons thundered, sending flaming stones crashing into the fortress walls. Ballistae unleashed iron-tipped bolts, impaling enemy archers upon the ramparts.

"FOR MORADIN!" Thrain bellowed as the first wave of dwarves charged.

The gates shuddered under the impact of a battering ram, driven forward by Ironbreaker warriors.

Arrows and boiling oil rained down from the defenders, but the dwarves held their ground, shields raised, pushing forward inch by inch.

Rogrim led the charge, smashing aside enemy spearmen, his hammer sending bodies crashing into the mud.

Pigrim dodged between hulking warriors, stabbing and slashing where he could, his blade finding weak points in armor.

Suddenly, a great explosion erupted from the fortress walls—the warlord's forces had rigged traps, sending fire and rock cascading down upon the attackers.

Several dwarves were crushed, but still, they pressed on.

"THE GATES!" Rogrim bellowed.

A final swing of the battering ram, and the great iron doors buckled inward.

"GO! GO! GO!"

The dwarves surged into the fortress.

Inside, the warlord's warriors stood ready.

A clash of steel erupted as the two forces collided in a whirlwind of blades and hammers.

The courtyard ran red with dwarven and human blood alike.

Rogrim fought like a beast, his hammer smashing skulls, breaking bones, sending warriors flying.

An enemy champion, clad in heavy plate, charged at him with a greatsword—

Rogrim caught the blade on his shield, twisted, and slammed his hammer into the man's ribs, sending him crumpling.

Pigrim was locked in a frantic duel, ducking and rolling beneath the strikes of a towering mercenary.

The halfling dodged left, then right, then finally plunged his dagger up—straight into the enemy's throat.

"How's that for a shieldbearer?!" he gasped, wiping blood from his cheek.

More warriors flooded the courtyard, and the battle raged on.

Then—

From the fortress stairs, the false warlord emerged.

His black armor gleamed, his runed axe glowing with dark power.

And he was smiling.

Rogrim turned, locking eyes with the warlord.

The two warriors stood in the chaos of battle, bloodied, bruised, but unbroken.

The warlord smiled.

"Ye made a mistake, dwarf," he growled. "Coming back here. Thinking this war would end any way but my way."

Rogrim rolled his shoulders.

"Aye?" He spat blood into the mud. "Funny. I was just thinkin' the same thing."

The warlord roared and charged.

Their weapons clashed like thunder, shaking the very stones beneath them.

The warlord's axe came down heavy, nearly splitting Rogrim's shield in half.

Rogrim rolled aside, countering with a hammer swing—but the warlord blocked it, twisting into a brutal counterattack.

The force sent Rogrim sprawling.

The warlord pounced, bringing his axe down—

Rogrim raised his shield just in time, metal screeching against metal as he barely deflected the blow.

Pigrim tried to intervene, but an enemy warrior tackled him aside.

"STAY DOWN, LAD!" Rogrim roared.

This was his fight.

The warlord swung again, but this time, Rogrim was ready.

He ducked, stepped inside the attack, and smashed his hammer into the warlord's ribs.

The warlord staggered, gasping.

Rogrim didn't let up.

He grabbed the warlord by the collar, yanked him forward—

And headbutted him so hard the sound echoed across the battlefield.

The warlord stumbled, dazed, his stance wavering.

Rogrim saw his opening.

With a mighty roar, he raised his hammer high—

"THIS IS FOR MORADIN!"

And he brought it crashing down.

The warlord's skull caved inward, his body collapsing lifelessly to the ground.

The battlefield fell silent.

Then—a roar of victory erupted from the dwarves.

The false warlord was dead.

The battle was won.

The fortress of the warlord was razed, its halls cleansed of corruption.

The surviving warriors swore fealty to Moradin, and the land, once tainted by tyranny, was returned to the clans.

As the army of Moradin stood victorious, Rogrim, bloodied and exhausted, turned to Pigrim.

The halfling grinned. “Well. That only took two wars, three near-deaths, and a lot of shouting.”

Rogrim laughed, slinging an arm over Pigrim’s shoulder.

“Aye, lad. But at least this time… it’s done.”

And so, the legend of Rogrim, the Paladin, the Hammer of Moradin, was written in stone.

A legend of war, honor, and an oath fulfilled.

The Halls of Gandor roared with laughter, music, and the clashing of tankards, as the greatest feast in dwarven memory unfolded. The war was won, the false warlord slain, and the honor of the faith restored.

Long wooden tables, piled high with roasted meats, spiced breads, wheels of cheese, and barrels of the finest dwarven ale, stretched across the Great Hall. The air was thick with the scent of sizzling boar and honey-glazed lamb, and every warrior, chieftain, and priest of Moradin raised their mugs in celebration.

At the head table, Rogrim and Pigrim sat with the High Priest, surrounded by the clan thanes and battle-hardened warriors who had fought by their side.

Pigrim, sitting on a high wooden stool to match the height of the dwarves, tilted back his mug and let out a satisfied sigh.

"By the Holy Forge, I think we earned this one," he said, wiping foam from his lips.

Rogrim grunted, tearing into a roasted leg of lamb. "Aye, lad. No more bloody marches through snow, no more sieges, no more broken bones. Just good food, strong drink, and songs of our glory."

Pigrim raised a finger. "And no more damned geese."

The warriors nearby burst into laughter.

Thrain Stonefist, still nursing a bandaged arm, raised his mug. "To Rogrim, the Hammer of Moradin!"

"TO ROGRIM!" the hall echoed, tankards slamming against the wooden tables.

Rogrim smiled. "Aye, aye, praise me all ye like—but don’t forget who saved yer hide when ye took an axe to the shoulder, Thrain."

Thrain chuckled. "Bah! Just a scratch! Unlike poor Kordrim over there, who had to be dragged off the field like a sack of potatoes!"

Kordrim Blackaxe, still sore and bruised, took a long sip of ale. "Aye, well, I’ll remind ye who was the first through the enemy gates!"

"After Rogrim broke them," Pigrim added with a smile.

More laughter rang through the hall.

As the feast continued, the High Priest of Moradin stood, raising a golden goblet.

The hall fell silent.

His deep voice echoed across the chamber.

"Brothers. Sisters. Warriors of the faith." He let his gaze pass over the assembled champions, the chieftains, the wounded, and the victorious. "Tonight, we drink not just for ourselves, but for those who fell so we could stand."

The dwarves bowed their heads in respect.

"Through battle, through trial and fire, we have proven that honor cannot be broken. That the will of Moradin is as unyielding as the mountain itself. And at the heart of that unyielding will…"

His eyes met Rogrim's.

"…stands a dwarf who would not yield. Not to pain. Not to despair. Not even to the hand of death itself. Rogrim, Hammer of Moradin, rise."

The hall cheered as Rogrim stood, lifting his warhammer high.

"Ye honor me, High Priest," Rogrim said, his voice gruff, but steady. "But I fought not for glory, not for titles, but for our people. For our faith. For every dwarf who swore an oath and kept it."

The dwarves slammed their mugs against the tables in agreement.

"And now," Rogrim continued, "I say we honor our fallen… by drinking 'til we can't stand!"

The hall erupted into cheers.

What followed was a night of legendary drinking, grand tales, and traditional dwarven chaos.

Pigrim found himself in an arm-wrestling match with a dwarf three times his size.

"This is a mistake, this is a mistake—" he muttered as the contest began.

The table cracked in half, sending both of them tumbling to the floor, to roaring laughter.

Across the hall, a group of warriors gathered for a storytelling contest.

Thrain recounted the battle of the first siege, exaggerating his role greatly.

"And so there I stood, surrounded by twenty warriors, bleeding, tired, but unbroken—"

"It was four warriors!" Kordrim shouted.

"Bah! The ale must be gettin’ to me," Thrain grumbled.

Rogrim, meanwhile, was locked in a drinking contest with a clan elder.

"Ye ain’t what ye used to be, lad," the old dwarf grinned.

"Neither are ye, old-timer," Rogrim retorted, slamming back another tankard.

And somewhere, in the madness of the night, a friendly brawl broke out—because no dwarven feast is truly complete without one.

As the night wore on, and the fires burned low, the warriors began to drift off to sleep—some at the tables, some leaning against barrels, and others curled up by the hearth, snoring loudly.

Pigrim, half-asleep, muttered, "If I die tomorrow, bury me with ale."

Rogrim, his hammer resting beside him, smiled.

"Rest easy, lad," he said, gazing at the flickering flames.

"For tonight, we drink as kings."

And in the halls of Moradin, among warriors, priests, and the honored dead—their victory would never be forgotten.